

ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

**THE CASE OF THE
DROWSY
MOSQUITO**



A PERRY MASON STORY



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Annotation

The receptionist told Perry Mason there were two men waiting in the outer office; one of them looked like a prosperous banker, the other a tramp. One wanted to see him about some corporation law, and the other had a damage claim. So Mason said, "I'll see the tramp. Tell the banker I can't be bothered with corporation law."

But it turned out it was the tramp who wanted to see him about corporation law. And that, in turn, merged into the story of one of the famous Lost Mines of the desert region of Southern California; of a sinewy little desert prospector and his partner, who had struck it rich, "housed-up" and, losing his health, had forsaken the big red-tiled mansion in the fashionable district of San Roberto to spread his sleeping bag out in the cactus garden at the far corner of the grounds. And finally there was the mysterious drowsy mosquito — was it a harbinger of death?

These characters, together with the lure of a fabulously rich gold deposit, discovered more than half a century ago, then lost, and lying untouched year after year, waiting only for chance and the ingenuity of Perry Mason to bring it back into the limelight, make for a fast moving, baffling Perry Mason yarn.

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Erle Stanley Gardner

The Case of the Drowsy Mosquito

Cast of Characters

Perry Mason — Criminal lawyer, who forges a signature to foil a trap

Della Street — His secretary, whose loyalty leads her to a bad tummy-ache

Salty Bowers — A prospector, who loves the desert, with or without gold

Banning Clarke — His partner, who has a weak heart but a fighting spirit

Velma Starler — A trained nurse, who knows what to do for arsenic poisoning, but can't find the drowsy mosquito

Nell Sims — A cook, who believes that the way to a man's stomach is through his heart

Dr. Bruce Kenward — Who had to make a night call on himself

Lillian Bradisson — A widow, who is over fifty, admits thirty-eight, and pretends twenty-eight

James Bradisson — Her son, who is cocksure, conceited, and a corporation president

Dorina Crofton — Nell Sims' daughter, who is absent-minded or in love

George V. Moffgat — A lawyer, who tries to make one stipulation too many

Hayward Small — Who enjoys remarkable success as a mining broker

Lucille Brunn — Who plans to marry Salty Bowers

Lieutenant Tragg — Who doesn't like country curves

Sheriff Sam Gregory — Who is wise in the ways of the cattle country

Paul Drake — A detective, who has to scout up a couple of burros in the middle of the night

Pete Sims — Who is a good claim-salter but a poor liar

District Attorney Topham — Who is perfectly willing to let Perry Mason solve the case for him

Chapter 1

Sun soaked the city streets, filtered through the office window so that the sign reading, PERRY MASON, ATTORNEY AT LAW, was thrown in reverse shadow where the sunlight splashed across the massive table loaded with law books.

It was a benign California sun that still held a touch of the growing greenery of spring. Later on in the season, this sun would burn down from the heavens with a fierce intensity that would dry the countryside to a baked brown, sucking every bit of moisture from the air, leaving a cloudless sky like that of the desert only a hundred and fifty miles to the east. Now it was a golden benediction.

Across the desk, Della Street held a fountain pen poised over the pages of a shorthand notebook. Mason, a pile of correspondence in front of him, skimmed through the letters, dropped some in the wastebasket, tossed others to Della Street with a few crisp comments. Only in cases of the greatest importance did he dictate the exact wording of his reply.

The pile represented accrued correspondence over a period of three months. Mason detested answering letters, and only tackled his mail when the pile had assumed threatening proportions despite the daily weeding of Della Street's skillful fingers.

The door from the outer office opened abruptly and the girl who operated the switchboard at the reception desk said, "You have two clients out there, Mr. Mason. They're very anxious to see you."

Mason looked at her reprovingly. "Gertie, a balmy sun beckons from a cloudless sky; a client, who owns a big cattle ranch, has asked me to inspect a boundary line that's in dispute. The ranch contains twenty-five thousand acres, and I have just asked Della how she would like to ride a horse with me over rolling cattle country. Think of it, Gertie, acres of green grass, live-oak trees with huge trunks and sturdy limbs. In the background, hills covered with sagebrush, chamise, and chaparral; and behind them, a glimpse of snow-capped mountains outlined sharply in the clear air of a blue back-drop... Gertie, do you ride a horse?"

She grinned. "No, Mr. Mason. I have too much sympathy for the horse. The out-of-doors is a swell place on moonlight nights, but aside from that I like food and leisure. My idea of a perfect day is to sleep until noon, have coffee, toast and bacon in bed, and perhaps a dish of deep red strawberries swimming in thick yellow cream that melts the sugar when you pour it on. So don't try to tempt me with bouncing up and down on the hurricane deck of a cattle pony. I'd shorten his wheelbase and ruin his alignment, and he'd wreck my stance."

"Gertie, you're hopeless. As an assistant cowpuncher, you're a total loss. But how would you get along as a bouncer, a Mickey Finn chasing unwelcome clients out of the office? Tell them I'm busy. Tell them I have an important appointment — an appointment with a horse."

"They won't chase. They're insistent."

"What are they like?" Mason asked, glancing speculatively at the electric clock on the desk.

"One of them," she said, "is a typical picture of middle-aged prosperity. He looks like a banker or a state senator. The other is — well, the other is a tramp, and yet he's a dignified tramp."

"Any idea what they want?"

"One of them says it's about an automobile accident, and the other wants to see you about a question of corporation law."

Mason said, "That settles it, Gertie. The tramp's entitled to justice and may have trouble getting it. I'll see *him*. But the banker, with his question of corporation law, can go to some other attorney. I'm damned if I—"

Gertie said, "It's the tramp that wants to see you about the corporation law."

Mason sighed. "Gertie, you're hopeless! Your mind is steeped in strawberries swimming in cream, hot coffee-cake, and sleep. A tramp comes to my office to consult me on corporation law, and you treat it as a purely routine affair! Della, go out and chase the banker away. Treat the tramp as an honored guest. We'll put off our horseback riding until tomorrow."

Della Street followed Gertie through the door to the reception room. She was back in a matter of five minutes.

"Well?" Mason asked.

"He's not a tramp."

"Oh," and Mason's tone showed disappointment.

"I don't quite make him out," Della said. "His clothes are not exactly shabby, but they're well worn and sun-bleached. I place him more as a man who has lived outdoors for some definite purpose, and he's taciturn and suspicious. He won't tell me a thing about his business."

"Let him get sore and leave then," Mason said irritably.

"And he won't do that. He's waiting with the patience of a — of a burro. Chief, I've got it! The man must be a prospector. I should have realized it sooner. He has the stamp of the desert on him, the patience acquired from associating with burros. He's here to see you, and he's *going* to see you — today, tomorrow, or next week. Someone told him to see Perry Mason, and he's going to see Perry Mason."

Mason's eyes twinkled. "Bring him in, Della. What's his name?"

“Bowers. He didn’t give me any first name or initials.”

“And his residence?”

“He says just a blanket roll.”

“Splendid! Let’s have a look at him.”

Della smiled knowingly, withdrew and returned with the client.

Bowers, standing in the doorway, surveyed Mason with an appraisal which held just a trace of anxiety. He was neither deferential nor affable. There was about the man an aura of simple dignity. The sun-bleached workshirt was scrupulously clean, although it had been laundered so many times it had gone limp and frayed around the collar. The leather jacket was evidently made of buckskin, and it definitely was not clean. It had been worn until various incrustations of dirt had brought to it a certain polish, like the glaze on pottery. The overalls were patched and faded — but clean. The boots had acquired a pastel shade from long miles of plodding travel. The broad-brimmed hat had seen years of service. Perspiration had left deep permanent stains around the hatband. The brim had curled up into a distinctive swirl.

The man’s face dominated his clothing. Behind that face, a simple, unpretentious soul peered out at a world that was largely foreign. Yet the eyes held no bewildered expression. They were hard, determined and self-reliant.

“Good morning,” Mason said. “Your name is Bowers?”

“That’s right. You’re Mason?”

“Yes.”

Bowers walked across the office, sat down across from Mason and glanced at Della Street.

“That’s all right,” Mason said. “She’s my secretary. She keeps notes on my cases. I have no secrets from her, and you can trust her discretion.”

Bowers clasped the brim of his hat between bronzed fingers, *rested* his forearms on his knees, let the hat swing back and forth.

“Just go ahead and tell me your troubles, Mr. Bowers.”

“If it’s all the same with you, call me Salty. I don’t like this Mister stuff,”

“Why ‘Salty’?” Mason asked.

“Well, I used to hang around the salt beds in Death Valley quite a bit and they got to calling me that. That was when I was a lot younger, before I teamed up with Banning.”

“And who’s Banning?”

“Banning Clarke. He’s my partner,” Salty said with simple faith.

“A mining partner?” “That’s right.”

“And you’re having trouble with him over a mine?” Mason asked.

“Trouble with *him*?”

“Yes.”

“My gosh!” Salty exploded. “I told you he was my *partner*. You don’t have trouble with a partner.”

“I see.”

“I’m protecting him. It’s a crooked corporation — a crooked president.”

“Well, just go ahead and tell me about it,” Mason invited.

Salty shook his head.

Mason regarded the man curiously.

“You see it’s this way,” Salty explained. “I ain’t smart like Banning. He’s got education. He can tell you about it.”

“All right,” Mason said crisply. “I’ll make an appointment with him for—”

Salty interrupted. “He can’t come. That’s why I had to come.”

“Why can’t he come?”

“The doc’s got him chained down.”

“In bed?”

“No, not in bed, but he can’t climb stairs and he can’t travel. He has to stay put.”

“His heart?”

“That’s right. Banning made the mistake of housing-up. A man that’s lived out in the open can’t house-up. I tried to tell him that before he got married, but his wife had sort of highfalutin’ ideas. Once Banning got rich — and I mean stinking rich — she got the idea he had to get high hat. Well, I shouldn’t say anything against her. She’s dead now. What I’m telling you is that a desert man can’t house-up.”

“Well,” Mason said good-naturedly, “I guess we’ll have to go and see Banning.”

“How far from here does he live?” Della Street asked with sudden inspiration.

“About a hundred miles,” Salty announced casually. Mason’s eyes twinkled. “Put a notebook in a brief case, Della. We’re going to see Banning. I’m interested in the miner who housed-up.”

“He ain’t housed-up now,” Salty said hastily. “I fixed that as soon as I got there.”

“But I thought you said he was,” Della said.

“No, ma’am. The doctors say he can’t leave the place, but he ain’t housed-up.”

“Where is he then?” Mason asked.

“I’ll have to show you. It’d take too long to explain, an’ when I got done, you wouldn’t believe me, anyway.”

Chapter 2

At thirty miles an hour, Perry Mason turned right at the city limits of San Roberto, trailing along behind the battered, unpainted 1930 pickup in which Salty Bowers was leading the way.

The car ahead turned sharply and began to climb.

"It looks as though he's going to give us a whirl through the exclusive residential district," Della Street said.

Mason nodded, took his eyes from the road long enough to glance at the ocean far below — a blue, limpid ocean with a fringe of lazy surf, a border of dazzling white sand outlining the fronds of palm trees.

The driveway skirted the crest of sun-drenched hills, spotted with country estates of the wealthy. In a small amphitheater below, less than a mile away, Mason could see the dazzling white of the little city of San Roberto.

"Why do you suppose he's taking us up here?" Della Street asked. "He certainly can't—" She broke off! as the dilapidated car ahead, wheezing and knocking, rattling and banging, yet covering the ground with dogged efficiency, swung abruptly to a halt by the side of a white stucco wall.

Mason grinned. "By George, he lives here. He's opening the gate."

Della Street watched as Salty's key clicked back the lock on a big gate of ornamental grillwork.

Salty Bowers returned to his automobile and wheezed it through the gates, and Mason followed.

There were a good six acres in the place, a location where real estate was valued by the inch.

The spacious Spanish-style house with white stucco and red tile had been designed to fit into its surroundings. It sat back high up on the sloping ground, as if it had simply settled itself to enjoy the view. The terraced grounds had been so skillfully landscaped that it seemed as if Nature herself had done most of the work, and man had only added an occasional path, a few stone benches and a fish pond.

The high stucco wall wrapped an air of privacy about the estate, and, at the far corner, outlined sharply the weird forms of desert growth, cacti, creosote and even the gawky arms of a cactus palm.

Della Street all but gasped at the view which swept out before them in a vista of blues, dazzling whites and restful greens.

"Is *this* Banning Clarke's house?" Mason asked Salty when the latter had moved up to his running board.

"Yep. This is her."

"A beautiful house."

"He don't live there."

"I thought you said he did."

"He don't."

"Pardon me. I misunderstood you. I asked if this was his place."

"It's his place. He don't live in the house. I pulled him out of that."

We're camped out down there in the cactus. See that little column of smoke going up? Looks like he's cooking up a bite to eat. It's just like I told you. He housed-up. That put his pump on the blink. So I sort of took over. He's too weak to go gallivantin' around the desert yet. The doc says he can't even climb stairs. I'm gettin' him back in shape. He's better now than he was last week — better last week than he was last month."

"You're eating and sleeping out there in the grounds?"

"Uh-huh. That's right."

"Then who's living in the house?"

"People."

"Who?"

"I'll let Banning tell you about that. Come on. Let's go see him."

They walked down a trail into the sandy corner devoted to a cactus garden. Here prickly pear grew in ominous clumps. Cholla cactus seemed delicate and lace-like. Only those who were acquainted with the desert would realize the wicked strength of those barbed points or the danger that lurked in the little balls of spine-covered growth which dropped to the ground from the parent plant. Here also were spineless cacti growing to a height of some ten feet, furnishing a protective screen as well as a windbreak for the rest of the garden.

A six-foot wall built of varicolored rocks skirted the cactus garden. "All *rocks* from desert mines," Salty explained. "Banning built that wall in his spare time before his heart went bad. I hauled in the rocks."

Mason let his eye run over the highly colored rocks. "You kept the rocks from each mine separate?" he asked.

"Nope. Just hauled 'em in and dumped 'em. They're just color rocks. Banning arranged 'em."

The little trail twisted and turned, detouring the cactus patches, making it seem as if they were walking through the desert itself.

In a little cove in the cacti, a very small fire was burning in a rock fireplace on top of which had been placed a couple of strips of iron. Straddling these iron strips, a fire-blackened agateware stewpan emitted little puffs of steam as the boiling contents elevated the lid in spasmodic jerks.

Beside the fire, squatting on his heels, watching the flame with an intensity of concentration, was a man of perhaps fifty-five. And despite the fact that he was thin, he seemed to have gone soft. The

flesh had sagged under his eyes, dropped down on cheeks and chin. In repose, the lips seemed flabby and a little blue. Only when he looked up and his visitors caught the steel-gray impact of his eyes was it apparent that while the body had gone soft the soul within the man was hard as nails.

He straightened up. A smile lighted his face, his pearl-gray cowboy hat came off in a sweeping bow.

Salty Bowers said succinctly, "This is him," and then after a moment. "The girl's the secretary... I'll watch the beans."

Salty moved over to the fire and assumed a squatting position, sitting on the heels of his boots looking as though he could be comfortable in that position for hours. His attitude was that of a man whose duty has been done.

Mason shook hands.

"You're just in time for a little bite of lunch — in case you can eat plain prospector's grub," Banning announced, glancing surreptitiously at Della Street.

"I'd love it," she said.

"There aren't any chairs, but you don't need to scrape away the sand to make certain there isn't a sidewinder in the place where you're going to sit. Just sit down."

"You seem to have quite a little desert of your own here," Mason said by way of making conversation.

Clarke grinned. "You haven't seen it all, yet. How about taking a look around my little domain before you sit down?"

Mason nodded.

Clarke led them around a large clump of cactus into another little cactus-enclosed alcove. Here, two burros stood with heads lowered, long ears drooping forward. A couple of worn packsaddles were on the ground, together with a litter of pack boxes, ropes, a tarpaulin, a pick, shovel and gold pan.

"Surely," Mason said, "you don't use these here?"

"Well," Clarke said, "we do and we don't. The outfit belongs to Salty. He couldn't be happy away from his burros and I don't think they'd be happy away from him. And somehow you wake up feeling better if a burro bugles you awake than when you just sleep yourself out. Now, over here — right over around this trail, if you will, please. Now over here we have—"

Banning Clarke abruptly ceased talking, whirled to face Mason and Della Street, lowered his voice almost to a whisper, spoke with swift rapidity. "Don't ever mention this in front of Salty. They've set a trap for him — a woman. Once this woman marries him, she'll live with him a couple of months, sue him for a divorce, and either grab his stock or tie it up in litigation. He's absolutely loyal. He'll do

anything I ask him. I've told him I want him to pool his stock in a certain mining company with mine. The minute that woman finds out she can't get control of the stock, she'll never marry him. He doesn't know this — why I'm doing it. He doesn't understand what's back of all this, but once this woman realizes that stock has been tied up so she can't get her hands on it she'd no more think of marrying him than she would of jumping into a hot furnace. Don't say anything about this."

Almost immediately Clarke raised his voice and said, "And this is our bedroom."

He indicated another little sanded alcove. Two bedrolls were neatly spread out in the shade of a big cactus.

"Some day I'm going to move out of here and back into the real desert. It won't be today, tomorrow, or the next day, but I'm starved for the desert. I don't suppose I can explain it so you'll understand."

"Salty gave us a pretty good explanation," Mason said.

"Salty isn't much on using words."

"He's pretty good at conveying ideas, though," Mason observed.

"Ever hear of the Louie-Legs Mine?" Clarke asked abruptly.

"I don't believe I have. Rather an unusual name, isn't it?"

"It's the name of that burro over there. We named the mine after him. It was a good strike. Salty sold out his interest to a syndicate, got fifty thousand and blew it all in. A few months later he woke up one morning stony broke."

"Oh," Della Street exclaimed sympathetically.

There was a twinkle in Banning Clarke's gray eyes as he shifted them to Della. "That," he announced, "was the sensible thing to do. That's what I should have done."

Mason chuckled.

"You see," Clarke went on, "we get a warped perspective on money. Money isn't worth a thing except to use in buying something. And money can't buy anything better than the life of a prospector. There's something back in a prospector's subconscious mind that realizes this. That's why so many of them try to get rid of money as quickly as possible. I hung onto my money. It was a mistake."

"Go on," Mason said, "you're beginning to say something."

"I kept my interest in the mine," Clarke said. "I should have thrown it away. That mine kept getting richer the more we developed it. The syndicate that had purchased Salty's share tried to freeze me out. We had litigation. Then one of the members of the syndicate died. I picked up his stock. That gave me control. After that I got the other shares. I called Salty in one day and told him I'd bought his stock back for him. I told him I'd give him some and hold the rest in trust. He almost cried with gratitude. For a month he lived here with me and

everything was fine. Then he went on a bat again and came back broke. This time he was so ashamed he couldn't face me. He disappeared into the desert.

"Then I saw a chance to make some more money. I organized the Come-Back Mining Syndicate, started buying up old mines, developing them and bringing them back. It was a hectic life. My wife had social aspirations. I found myself living in a huge house, attending functions for which I cared nothing, eating heavy meals of rich food — Oh well, there's no need to go into that.

"I'd been a plunger all my life, but I'd made good on my gambles. My wife disapproved of the wild chances I took, so I put virtually all of my property in her name. Then I wanted to go hunt up Salty and go back into the desert. The fact that I even thought of such a thing shocked and hurt her. She wasn't well at the time. I stayed on. She died. Her will left all of her separate property to her mother, Lillian Bradisson, and to her brother, James Bradisson. I don't think she had ever anticipated the effect of that will. Because I was the producer she thought I was rich. She didn't realize that inasmuch as that stock had been a gift, she had left me broke. I went to court, claiming that the stock was really community property, kept in my wife's name for her protection."

"And you want me to represent you in that case?" Mason asked with an obvious lack of enthusiasm.

"No," Clarke said. "The case was settled. The judge who tried it suggested it would be a good thing if we'd quit fighting and split the stock sixty-forty. We did that. There'd been hard feelings engendered over the litigation. Jim Bradisson, my brother-in-law, thinks he's a business genius. He'd never amounted to anything, but always claimed it was because he'd been hounded by bad luck. My wife was a lot younger than I. He's only thirty-five, cocksure of himself, conceited. You know the type."

Mason nodded.

"My wife's death, the life I'd been leading, the worries, and then that litigation coming on top of everything else was too much for me. I broke all at once. My heart went bad. My nerves went to pieces. Salty heard I was sick, and showed up. Then a peculiar thing developed. It turned out that the stock I'd set aside for Salty, holding it in trust for him, represented the controlling interest in the company.

"Salty was shocked to find how ill I was. He started to bring me back out of it. I think he's going to do it. I turned the stock over to him so he could vote it. Between us, we keep Jim Bradisson from going absolutely hog-wild. And then Salty had to go and fall in love. I think Mrs. Bradisson engineered it. He's going to marry. His wife will get that stock just as sure as I'm standing here. I want you to draw up

a pooling agreement and—”

He broke off just as the sound made by beating on the bottom of the frying pan with a big spoon announced that Salty had lunch ready.

“I’m going to have Salty sign a pooling agreement by which he votes his stock with mine,” Clarke went on quickly, as the lunch call subsided. “I wanted you to know why I was doing it so you wouldn’t ask too many embarrassing questions. If Salty thought I doubted the woman he’s going to marry, it would hurt him.”

“I see,” Mason said. “That’s all you wanted?”

“No. There’s one other thing, but I can talk that over with you in front of Salty.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a fraud case. I want to hire you to represent the defendant. You’re going to lose the lawsuit. You haven’t a leg to stand on.”

“Who’s the plaintiff?”

“The corporation.”

Mason said, “Just a minute. Are you trying to retain me so you can control both sides of the litigation and—”

“No, no. Don’t misunderstand,” Clarke said. “Win it if you can, but you can’t. You’re licked before you start.”

“Then why go to court?”

For a moment Clarke seemed on the point of giving Mason his full confidence. Then the beating on the frying pan was resumed and Salty’s voice called out, “Come and get it or I’ll throw it out.”

Clarke said abruptly, “I can’t tell you all of the ramifications.”

“And I don’t think I’ll handle the case,” Mason said.

Clarke grinned. “Well, anyway we can eat some lunch and talk it over. I think you’ll handle it when you know more about it. And after a while there’ll be another matter — a mystery you’ll have to solve. And in the meantime Jim Bradisson is buying mines by the dozen from Hayward Small, and I think it’s a situation that stinks. But by all means let’s eat.”

Chapter 3

They sat around the little cooking fire over which a kettle of dishwater was now steaming. Salty, moving with a certain awkward efficiency, seemed to do everything without appreciable effort. There were well-cooked frijoles, a dish made of jerked venison chopped up and cooked with tomatoes, onions and peppers, cold bannock, thick syrup, and big agateware cups of hot tea.

Banning Clarke attacked the meal with relish, cleaning out his plate and passing it over for a second helping.

Salty's eyes twinkled. "Couple o' months ago," he said, "he was toying with his grub — couldn't eat."

"That's right," Clarke agreed. "My heart started going bad and kept getting worse. The doctors had me taking medicine, then keeping perfectly still. Finally, they had me in bed. Salty showed up and made his own diagnosis. He said I had to get back out in the open. The doctor said it would kill me. So Salty fixed up this little camp out here in the cactus garden and moved me out here. I've been eating and sleeping out in the open, living on the sort of grub I'm accustomed to, and I can feel myself getting better every day now."

"Your heart's a muscle just like any other kind of a muscle," Salty said positively. "You get to living soft, and your muscles *all* get soft. The main thing is fresh air and sunshine. I don't mind telling you, though, this air sorta gets me down. It ain't like the desert. It's nice all right, but when fog comes in from the ocean — *b-r-r-r!*" Salty shivered at the very thought.

"Won't be long until we'll be getting out of here," Clarke promised. "Miss Street has brought a portable typewriter, Salty. Mason can dictate an agreement pooling our stock. We can sign it and get it over with so Mr. Mason won't have to make another trip."

"Suits me."

"What about this fraud suit?" Mason asked.

Clarke said, "I'll have to tell you a little something about how I'm situated here so you'll get the picture. I have a nurse who lives in the house and keeps an eye on me, Velma Starler. I have an eccentric housekeeper, Nell Sims. She kept a restaurant out in Mojave. Salty and I used to eat there whenever we were in that section of the country. After my wife died she sort of moved in."

"There is perhaps some bond of affection?" Mason asked.

Clarke laughed. "Not in that way. She's married and has a daughter by a former marriage around twenty years old. She's really a character. Her husband, Pete Sims, is just as much of a character in his way as she is in hers. Pete's a claim-salter, a bunco artist, and a

periodic drunkard with an aversion for work. Hayward Small, a mining broker and promoter who has been dabbling around in psychology and the power of mental suggestion, told Pete, a year or so ago, about split personalities — and ever since then Pete has had a secondary personality for a scapegoat. It's absolutely ludicrous, but he seems naively sincere about it. He claims Small asked permission to use him as a subject in conducting some hypnotic experiments, and that almost as soon as he became hypnotized this secondary personality began to make its appearance. What makes it so utterly ridiculous is that Pete hasn't a sufficient idea of split personalities to make his stories even slightly plausible. He just goes ahead with his drinking and swindling and then blames all of his lapses on this secondary personality, a mysterious entity whom he calls 'Bob.' "

"Makes it handy," Mason said, and then added, "for Pete."

"Very."

"Does *anybody* believe him?"

"Sometimes I think his wife does. You never know just what Nell believes and what she doesn't believe. She has a peculiar philosophy of her own and is given to garbling proverbs. People used to flock to her restaurant just to hear her garbled proverbs. She's great for interpolating short comments. However, you'll meet her."

"They're all living at the house?"

"Yes."

"Also Mrs. Bradisson and James Bradisson?"

"That's right."

"Anyone else?"

"This Hay ward Small I was telling you about. He's a mining broker. I think if we could uncover the actual relationship between Small and Bradisson we'd have something."

"In what way?"

"Since I became ill, Bradisson has become president of the company. The company is spending money right and left buying new mining claims. Nearly all of them are handled through Hayward Small. Of course, on the face of it it's all right, but I think Bradisson is getting some sort of kickback from Small. I haven't been able to prove anything."

"And this fraud action?"

Clarke chuckled. "Nell Sims had a string of mining claims that she'd taken in on a board bill. Everybody considered they were pretty worthless. They are. Pete Sims sold the claims to the corporation. They're the Shooting Star group. He swindled Jim Bradisson into buying them. The corporation claims Pete salted the mines and juggled samples so that he gave the properties an entirely fictitious value."

"Can they prove any of that?" Mason asked.

"I'm afraid they can prove every bit of it. But I want you to fight the case for Mrs. Sims. *And I want everyone to know that I have retained you to do so.*"

"And you expect I'll lose it?"

"I'm sure you will. When Pete showed up on one of his occasional homecomings and found Nell ensconced in a house where a tenderfoot had money to spend for mines, the temptation proved too much for him. He proceeded to take Bradisson to the cleaners. Pete's an innocent-appearing chap, but he pulls some mighty fast ones. He's a terrible liar, a whimsical crook who readily admits his own trickery, only blaming everything on his secondary personality, the unscrupulous 'Bob' who takes over every so often."

"And why do you want to have it known you've retained me to fight the fraud?" Mason asked.

"That," Clarke said, "is something I can't tell you. I— Oh, here's Miss Starler now."

Mason turned to watch the woman who came swinging along the sandy path — a woman in her early thirties, Mason judged, with finespun hair that glinted gold in the sunlight, slate-gray eyes that seemed just a little wistful, and a mouth that could smile easily.

Clarke said hastily in a low voice, "My doctor says she's too sympathetic to be on general duty. He likes to get her out on chronic cases where — Decided to check up on me, eh? Come on over and meet the company."

Clarke performed introductions. Velma Starler said, "Remember, you're supposed to lie down for half an hour after eating. Stretch out over there in the shade and relax."

She turned to Mason with a laugh. "He's rather an obstreperous patient. Now that Salty has entered the picture, I have my hands full trying to make him behave."

Clarke said, "Just a little business to do today, Velma. We'll have it over within half an hour. Then I'll rest."

She frowned slightly, said, "I promised Dr. Kenward I would make you rest every day."

"And Nell Sims," Velma went on, "wants to know if you won't please come in and have a bite of *civilized* grub."

"Civilized grub!" Salty growled. "A lot of spiced-up lettuce leaves and green vegetables. He ain't used to that stuff. He's used to good plain grub, and that's what he's getting out here."

Velma's laughter was easy and spontaneous. It made the others want to laugh too. And Mason could see the nerve tension which had gripped Banning Clarke as he recited his business troubles relax under her easy, good-natured affability.

"The trouble with you men," she said, "is that you've been partners too long. Mr. Clarke thinks that anything Salty cooks is all right. It's like Nell Sims says: 'The real way to a man's stomach is through his heart.' "

Mason said, smiling, "Well, that's a novel way of quoting an old proverb."

"Wait until you meet Nell Sims," she said. "She's full of those things. Well, I'll be running back to the house. I'm very glad to have seen you, and I hope you get things cleaned up so Mr. Clarke doesn't worry about them." Her glance at Mason was significant.

"We'll try," the lawyer promised.

Della Street said, "I'll go get my portable typewriter out of the car and—"

"I'll get it," Salty said. "I know right where it is. I saw you put it in."

Velma Starler said, "Well, I'll be running along. I — Oh, oh — here comes Nell Sims with your fruit juice."

She turned to Perry Mason, said jokingly, "There seem to be three dietitians on the job. Dr. Kenward *tries* to work out a balanced diet, but Nell Sims thinks he needs more fruits and salads, and Salty Bowers thinks he needs more of what he calls plain victuals."

The woman who had rounded the patch of cactus carrying a tray on which was a big glass of tomato juice stopped abruptly.

"It's all right, Nell," Banning Clarke said. "This is Miss Street and Mr. Mason — Mr. Perry Mason, the noted lawyer. He's going to represent you in that fraud case."

"Oh he is, is he?"

"Yes."

"Who's going to pay him?"

"I am."

"How much?"

"Never you mind."

She said inclusively to Della Street and Perry Mason, "How do you do," and added abruptly, "*I'm* not going to pay you anything. My husband sold that mine, I didn't."

Nell Sims was somewhere in the fifties, a strong woman whose shoulders had been stooped by hard toil, a competent big-boned worker who had never shirked a job in her life. Her eyes, black and inscrutable, had receded back of heavy dark eyebrows, to peer out at the world over heavy pouches; but she gave an impression of robust strength, of two-fisted competency.

"Nell insists that I don't get the proper vitamins in my camp cooking," Clarke explained. "She's always following me around with fruit juice."

“Better get fruit juice from Nature than bills from doctors,” Nell said. “I’m always telling him that a stitch in time is worth a pound of cure. I’ve got some nice lunch up at the house if you folks would like to eat.”

“Thanks. We’ve just had lunch,” Mason said.

Nell Sims surveyed the empty plates piled on the sand, and all but sniffed. “That Salty’s going to be the death of you yet,” she said to Banning Clarke. “ ‘Ptomaine Stew’ they used to call the stuff he cooked up when he was cooking out at the Desert Mesa Mine. I’ve known him for thirty-five years. He ain’t never—”

Salty came around the big cactus clump carrying Della Street’s portable typewriter and her brief case. “What’s that you’re saying about me?”

“Drat this cactus,” Nell exclaimed irritably. “You can’t see around the stuff and it don’t give you no privacy. Land sakes, you can’t even talk about a body without him sticking his ears in on the conversation. Well, it just serves you right, Salty Bowers. They say an eavesdropper never gathers no moss.”

Salty grinned good-naturedly. “Professional jealousy,” he explained to Perry Mason.

“Jealousy nothing,” Nell said. “That slum you cook would kill a horse.”

“I’ve always thrived on it.”

“Yes, you have! — You used to come sneaking into my restaurant so as to get some decent home-cooked food. The trouble with you, Salty Bowers, is that you ain’t scientific. You don’t know nothing about these here vitamins, and you cook everything in grease. Taking that stuff into the system is just loading it up with so much poison.”

Salty grinned and let it go at that.

“Nell has just so much sputtering to do,” Clarke explained; “but she’s fond of Salty, aren’t you, Nell?”

“Crazy about him,” she said sarcastically. “He’s without an equal in his field — so’s sandpaper. As a cook I think he’s one of the best burro packers in the business. Well, give me that empty glass and I’ll be getting out of here. Don’t want me to take those dishes up to the house and give them a decent wash, do you?”

Salty pulled a brier pipe from his pocket, tamped tobacco into it, grinned up at Nell and shook his head. “You get ’em all soapy.”

“Know what he does to dishes?” Nell asked Della Street. “Spreads them out on the ground, rubs sand in them until the sand comes out dry, then he scalds them off with about a cupful of water.”

“Only way on earth to get dishes really clean,” Salty said, puffing contentedly at his pipe. “Out in the desert you have to wash ’em that way because you haven’t much water; but if you come right down to

it, that cleans 'em. You take good clean sand and scour 'em out, and then wash the sand out, and you've got a clean dish."

"Clean!" Nell sputtered.

"And I mean *good* and clean."

"Just plain poison," Nell insisted. "I don't know what bad influence brought you back to poison Banning. You'd ought to be up at the house cooking for that brother-in-law of his. A little poisoning would do that man good."

Salty twisted his mouth into a smile. Little puffs of white smoke emerged at regular, contented intervals. "Why don't *you* poison him, Nell?"

Of a sudden, her face became utterly wooden in its lack of expression. She took the empty glass from Banning Clarke, started away, then turned and said meaningly to Salty, "Many a time in jest we cast pearls of wisdom before swine," and marched away.

Mason, grinning broadly, opened his cigarette case, passed it to Della Street, offered one to Banning Clarke. "I'd say," he announced, "she's quite a character. Where does she get the garbled proverbs?"

"No one knows," Clarke said. "Sometimes I think she twists them unintentionally; and then again, I think she's done it deliberately to make them conform to a philosophy of her own. At any rate, she's made a lot out of her stuff. The boys around Mojave used to come in to hear her talk as much as to eat her grub. Can you fix up that agreement here?"

Della Street opened the portable typewriter, balanced it on her lap, opened her brief case, fed in paper and carbons. "I've never typed out a pooling agreement in an imitation desert in the millionaire row of San Roberto," she said, "but I can certainly try. It may not be a very neat job."

"We don't care what it looks like," Banning Clarke said, "just so it's binding."

Mason nodded, asked a few questions, and started dictating the agreement to Della Street. When he had finished, he handed a copy to Clarke and one to Salty Bowers.

Clarke studied the paper carefully. Bowers didn't even bother to read his copy.

"You've got to read it," Mason told him.

"Why?"

"It might not be legal unless you did."

Bowers picked up his copy, laboriously read through it, his lips moving as he silently pronounced the words.

"All right?" Mason asked.

Banning Clarke whipped out his fountain pen, scrawled a signature across the agreement, handed the fountain pen to Salty

Bowers.

Bowers signed both agreements, gravely handed the pen back to Banning Clarke, picked up his pipe, started to put it back in his mouth, then changed his mind, let his eyes bore into those of his partner. "She's going to fool you," he said.

"What do you mean?" Clarke asked with that quick nervousness which showed embarrassment.

"You know what I mean," Salty said, and then put the pipe to his lips and scraped a match into flame. He paused with the flaming match held over the bowl of the pipe, shifted his eyes once more to Banning Clarke.

"She'll stick," he announced, and then sucked flame down into the crusted brier bowl of the pipe.

Chapter 4

Velma Starler, R.N., had been troubled of late with insomnia. Nurselike, she fought against taking drugs, particularly as she realized that her sleeplessness was due to an inner conflict.

She knew what “Rinkey” would say. Rinkey was her brother, a year younger, supercharged with the spirit of adventure, his head filled with a lot of definite ideas — new, unconventional ideas about people, about property, and about human rights. Rinkey would think she was wasting her time being tied by a golden chain to a pampered millionaire whose life was of no great importance. Rinkey was flying a plane somewhere in the South Seas. The Army needed nurses. Why didn’t Velma get in where she could do some good, he kept writing.

That was one side of the picture. The other was Velma’s mother. Her mother said, “Velma, you aren’t like Rinkey. He’s restless. He can’t stay still for a minute. He’ll always be in danger. He loves it. That’s his nature. I wouldn’t change it, even if I could. I’ve known ever since he was a boy that I must prepare myself for the shock, that someday they’d come to break the news to me — perhaps bluntly, or perhaps stumbling around trying to break it easy. A speeding automobile and a blown-out tire. Trying some new stunt in that airplane of his. I always knew it would be something swift and sudden; and that’s the way he would want it, and that’s the way I would want it. But you’re different, Velma. I can depend on you. You’re steady. You look ahead. You have a sense of responsibility... Oh, *please* don’t go, darling. After all, one in the family’s enough. I couldn’t stand to be left all alone. The world’s in such a hurry, it pushes you to one side and rushes on past you if you haven’t some anchor to hold you to the current of life.”

Then there was Dr. Kenward, tired, patient, overworked, knowing that he was no longer physically robust enough to stand the strain of night calls. Day after day he coped with an endless procession of sick people constantly crowding his office, with the same old symptoms, with the same old ailments, only the patients being new. Dr. Kenward had said, “Velma, you’re the only one I can depend on. The good ones have all gone. You won’t have to do much, just be there with the hypodermic in case he needs it. But don’t think what you are doing won’t be important. Keep him quiet, let him build himself up, and he’ll snap out of this. But the trouble with him is that the minute he begins to get well he’ll think he’s cured. He’ll crowd too much strain on that tired muscle, and then — well, that’s when you’re going to have to be there with the hypodermic — and minutes will be important. The way things are now, they won’t be able to get me in

time. You'll have to be on the job. A man of a different type could go to a hospital or a sanitarium. With him, it would be fatal. Remember, Velma, I'm counting on you to stand by me."

And so Velma Starler lived in the big red-tiled house, had a spacious room which looked out over the ocean, her professional duties being virtually nil, more psychological than physical. Her patient had moved out of the house, sleeping under the stars, eating an unbalanced diet, scorning advice — and thriving on the treatment.

The one concession he had consented to make was to have the push-button call bell wired to an extension so that a mere pressure of his thumb would summon Velma at any hour of the day or night.

Velma fought against a desire to turn over in the bed. Once give away to that twisting and turning and the cause was lost. She also knew better than to *try* to go to sleep. Trying to sleep was a mental effort. Sleep won't come when it's summoned; only when one is indifferent and completely relaxed... There was a mosquito somewhere in the room... Velma frowned annoyance.

A part of her mind was trying to concentrate on restful relaxation, another part was definitely irritated at the intermittent buzzing of that mosquito. She tried to locate the sound — apparently over in that far corner— Well, she'd have to get up, turn on the light and kill him. She simply couldn't sleep with a mosquito in the room, not the way her nerves were now.

She reached up and switched on the bed lamp over the head of the bed.

Almost instantly the mosquito ceased buzzing. Velma thrust her legs out of the side of the bed, kicked her delicate pink feet into sturdy slippers, and frowned at the corner of the room. She had known it would be like that. Turn on the light and the dratted mosquito would play possum somewhere — hiding in the shadows behind one of the pictures, probably. By the time she found him, she'd be wide awake for the rest of the night... Oh well, she was awake now anyway.

Velma picked up a fly swatter from the table near the bed, the table on which various articles were arrayed with professional efficiency. A little alcohol lamp for boiling the water, the hypodermic, the five-cell flashlight, a little notebook in which she kept track of the activities of the patient — a supervision which Banning Clarke would have bitterly resented had he known of it.

The mosquito simply wouldn't start again. Velma switched out the light, sat on the edge of the bed waiting.

Still the mosquito wouldn't buzz.

Knuckles sounded gently at her door.

"What is it?" Velma asked.

Velma could never hear the sound of a knock on her door at night

without having a thoroughly professional reaction. What was it this time? Had a spell hit Banning Clarke so suddenly that he couldn't even give that one convulsive press to the call button—? "What is it?" she called, again.

The voice of Nell Sims, sounding almost surreptitious, asked, "Are you all right, Miss Starler?"

"Why yes, of course. Why?"

"Nothing. I saw your light go on and I just wondered. Jim Bradisson and his mother are sick."

Velma was throwing a robe around her. "Come in. What's wrong with them?"

Nell opened the door. Attired in a somewhat dilapidated dressing gown, and broad shapeless slippers, her stringy, colorless hair wrapped in curlers, her eyes swollen with sleep, she came shuffling across the room, dragging her feet. "*They* say it's something they ate."

"Are any of the others sick?"

"That's what I wanted to find out. I saw your light go on. You sure you're all right?"

"Why, yes, of course. What are their symptoms?"

"Just ordinary symptoms — nausea, burning sensation. Something they ate! Bosh! That's all stuff and nonsense. They ate too much. Look at Mrs. Bradisson — keeps talking about her weight, never does a lick of work, picks out all the rich things to eat, can't ever pass up dessert, usually has a second helping if she can get it. Know what I said to her just the other day when she was struggling with her dress?"

Velma was hardly listening. She was debating whether to let the situation rectify itself, or to see what could be done. One thing was definitely certain: she mustn't let them get alarmed and call Dr. Kenward at this hour of the night.

"Know what I said to her?" Nell Sims repeated.

"What?" Velma asked, her mind far away.

Nell chuckled. "I spoke right up to her. I says, 'You've got to remember, Mrs. Bradisson, you can't eat your cake without having it too.'"

"How long has she been ill?"

"I don't know. I imagine about half an hour, from what she said."

Velma said, "I guess I'd better see if there's anything I can do."

Velma followed Nell Sims down the long hallway to her suite of rooms in the north wing, where Lillian Bradisson and her son James had a private sitting-room with bedrooms opening off from it.

Velma could hear the sound of retching, followed by groaning. The door to Mrs. Bradisson's room was open, and Velma, walking in with professional competence, said, "They told me you were ill, Mrs.

Bradisson. Is there something I can do?"

Mrs. Bradisson, weakened by her retching, dropped back against the pillows, regarding the nurse with bloodshot, watering eyes. "I've been poisoned. I'm going to die. I'm simply burning up." She stretched forth a trembling hand to a glass about a third filled with water, drained it eagerly, said, "Would you mind filling that for me again?"

Nell Sims took the glass to the bathroom, held it under the tap. "Nonsense," she said. "It wasn't what you ate. It was how much you ate. No one else in the house is sick."

"My son and I have both been poisoned."

"Nonsense!"

Mrs. Bradisson said, "I'm so glad you came down, Miss Starler. I just telephoned Dr. Kenward. He said to have you look in, and if you thought it necessary, he'd come right over. I think you'd better get him here."

"Oh, I think we'll do all right," Velma said cheerfully. "Whatever it is that's causing the gastric upset, you're getting rid of it, and you should be feeling all right within fifteen or twenty minutes. Perhaps we can find something that will sort of settle that stomach. I understand your son is ill?"

"He isn't as bad as I am. He— He—" Her face twisted with pain for a moment. Then she lay back limply against the pillows, utterly exhausted.

Velma said, "I'll look in on Jim and see how he is."

Jim Bradisson was apparently having the same symptoms as his mother, but he was stronger and more lucid. "Look, Velma," he said, "I think you'd better get Dr. Kenward up here right away."

"He's so overworked now," Velma explained, "I don't like to bother him with night calls unless it's very urgent. Quite frequently a person gets acute digestive upsets from food poisoning."

Jim Bradisson lowered his voice. "I've had food poisoning before. This isn't food poisoning. This is some other form of poison. My mouth seems to be full of metal filings — and I'm burning with thirst. It's a terrible burning thirst, which doesn't seem right to me, and my stomach and abdomen are sore. I can hardly touch them. I—I tell you, Velma, I think we've been poisoned."

Velma tried to make her voice sound casual. "Any cramping of the muscles?" she asked.

Bradisson showed surprise. "Why yes, now that you speak of it, I've had cramps in the calves of my legs — but that wouldn't have anything to do with this other. I suppose I walked a little too much this afternoon. You know, Mother and I climbed up around the hills. She's really determined to take off some weight."

Bradisson smiled. Keenly devoted to his mother, he recognized,

nevertheless, the utter futility of her sporadic attempts to take off weight. "About all she did," he said, "was to work up a terrific appetite, and, of course, she gave me one too. It was a lot of exercise. And then Nell Sims had fried chicken. Mother and I certainly went to town on that fried chicken. I'm afraid I'm going to have another spell. Good Lord! This is worse than seasickness."

Velma said, "Well, I'll telephone Dr. Kenward. Perhaps he'd better run over."

"I wish you would."

Bradisson dashed in the direction of the bathroom. Velma went downstairs to telephone Dr. Kenward. "I'm afraid you're going to have to come," she told him.

"The ordinary gastric disturbance in a violent form?" he asked over the telephone.

She placed her lips close to the mouthpiece. "The symptoms of arsenic poisoning, completely typical cases even down to the muscular cramps in the calves of the legs."

Velma always marveled at the way Dr. Kenward would seem half asleep over the telephone, and then suddenly, when confronted with an emergency, could become as wide awake as though he had been fully dressed and waiting for this particular call. "It will take me about twelve minutes," he said. "Watch the symptoms. I don't suppose you have any dialyzed iron?"

"No I haven't."

"All right. Give stomach washes, and stand by. I'll be there."

Dr. Kenward made it in just a little better than ten minutes, and for the next forty minutes Velma was as busy as she had ever been in her life. Dr. Kenward wasted no time in conversation. He simply went to work with stomach washing, the introduction of iron oxide to form the sparingly soluble ferric arsenite, and then washing out the iron compounds. The patients responded rather quickly to treatment. By two o'clock they were resting easily, and Dr. Kenward, with an all but imperceptible jerk of his head, summoned Velma Starler to a conference in her room.

Velma sat on the edge of the bed, giving Dr. Kenward the comfortable chair, saying nothing until he had settled back with the first deeply relaxing drag of cigarette smoke, exhaling it with what was almost a sigh.

It was a tense period of waiting, similar to that which she had shared with Dr. Kenward on innumerable nocturnal vigils. He had, for the moment, done everything that medical science could do. But before going home, he waited for the turn of the tide, for the treatment to develop its full efficiency. During such periods, he was relaxed in the sense that a pugilist is relaxed between rounds. His

mind, keyed up to racing efficiency, could not relax, but he could somewhat lessen the nerve strain by stretching out in a chair and relaxing his muscles as much as possible.

"There was fried chicken?" Dr. Kenward asked abruptly.

"Yes."

"Mrs. Sims has some sort of contract by which the people are boarded?"

"That's right. I don't know just what the arrangement is. I think Mr. Clarke makes up whatever deficit remains after she collects the board allowance from the various people. It's a peculiar arrangement, but the whole household is peculiar."

"There was plenty of fried chicken?"

"Plenty."

"All on one platter?"

"No. There were two platters."

"One at the end of the table where Mrs. Bradisson and her son were seated?"

"Yes."

Dr. Kenward said thoughtfully, "The fried chicken probably accounts for it."

"You mean the poisoning?"

"No. The length of time after the ingestion of the poison and before the development of symptoms. Greasy food delays the appearance of symptoms. Now the question is, *how* could the food have been poisoned without poison being administered to others at the table. You're certain the plates weren't served individually with food on them?"

"No. Everything was taken from dishes which were passed around."

Dr. Kenward said, "They're both insisting they didn't eat a thing after dinner. It must have been administered in some liquid, then."

"It's arsenic?"

"Undoubtedly. Mrs. Sims checked up on all the others. No one else was sick. Therefore, it must have— You checked up on Banning, didn't you?" Ken ward's voice was sharp with anxiety.

"Yes. I tiptoed out to the cactus garden. He and Salty were snoring peacefully away in their sleeping bags."

"They ate dinner at the table?"

"No, they didn't. They eat out there about half the time. Salty is quite a camp cook."

Dr. Kenward said, "Not exactly the sort of treatment you'd prescribe, and yet it seems to be doing the work, which is all one can ask of any treatment. I give it my frowning disapproval, which makes the pair of them feel something like a couple of schoolboys who have

sneaked out for an adventure. That's half of the battle — gives them that mental stimulus which comes of doing something they shouldn't be doing. Now, is there any possible way that you can think of—" He broke off at the sudden flash of expression which crossed her face. "Yes? What is it, Velma?"

"The salt shaker."

"What about it?"

The words were coming quickly now, rushing from the tip of her tongue as she suddenly realized the full import of the idea which had occurred to her.

"The salt shaker — Jim and his mother are both great salt eaters. They've developed such a taste for it that they pile salt on everything in sight, and Mrs. Sims finally gave them a special salt shaker. Every piece of chicken they ate they salted liberally, and I'll bet they're the only ones at the table that put salt on it. It was seasoned just right as it was."

Dr. Kenward ground out the half-smoked cigarette, was on his feet. "Let's go take a quiet look at that salt shaker."

They tiptoed through the corridors of the big, silent house, down the stairs, and into the dining-room. Velma finally located the saltcellar on the huge sideboard. Dr. Kenward spilled out some of the salt in the palm of his hand, took a small magnifying glass from his pocket, inspected it carefully, rubbed the salt around in his hand, then abruptly slipped the saltcellar into his pocket. "I think that does it," he said. "It will take an analysis to make certain. You had a bright idea there, Velma. It was the saltcellar — an easy way to eliminate the others. Don't say anything about it for the moment. I suppose we've got to go to the District Attorney with this, and I'd like to find out just a little more about it before I notify him. Of course, Jim Bradisson will accuse Banning Clarke of trying to administer poison. — How do these two rate with the others here?"

"Jim is all right," Velma said somewhat dubiously. "He has a repertoire of nineteen-thirty-four jokes. The polite ones are insipid, the impolite ones are strained, heavy — just aren't clever. But on the whole, he tries to be affable and agreeable, and if it weren't for that assumption of infallible superiority, he'd be popular."

"How about his mother?"

Velma shook her head. "She's vain, selfish, and so completely enraptured with that son of hers that she's absolutely impossible. She's full of little tricks — cheating on herself, announcing what she's going to do in regard to diet, what she's going to eat and what she isn't going to eat; then pretending that she's forgotten all about it until after she's taken the second helping. Or surreptitiously taking a second piece of cake when she thinks *we're* not looking — as though that,

somehow, would make it less fattening. She's fifty, admitting thirty-eight, pretending twenty-eight."

"Enemies?"

"I suppose so."

"But mostly, the situation revolves around this mining proposition?"

"Yes. And that fraud suit."

"What do you know about that?"

"Nothing much. Naturally, they don't discuss their business matters before me. There's friction. Pete Sims salted a claim and sold the string of mines to Jim Bradisson. I guess he really salted them. He's an old reprobate, a periodical drunkard. Does things and tries to blame them on a split personality. Then there's some trouble over control in the corporation. It's not at all a happy household, but they try to keep up appearances — in front of me, at any rate."

"How about this mining man?"

"Hayward Small? He's a live wire all right, but I wouldn't trust him. He's personally magnetic — a good salesman. Incidentally, he's paying a lot of attention to Nell Sims' daughter, Dorina — and he must be twelve or fifteen years older than she is."

"He has some sort of business hookup with Bradisson?"

"He's been scouting mines for the corporation."

Dr. Kenward said, "Well, I've got to notify the authorities. I think I'll wait until morning and get in touch with the District Attorney personally. In the meantime, you keep an eye on things. I'll take this salt shaker with me as evidence. I'll leave it to you to see that the patients eat absolutely nothing until I advise you. And that will be after the District Attorney has been notified — perhaps around eight o'clock."

When Dr. Kenward had left, Velma looked in on the patients to make certain they were resting easily, and then went back to her room and stretched out on her bed. Almost immediately she became drowsy. "Strange," she reflected; try to sleep and she couldn't. But once let her get hold of a case where she might have to take her sleep in little cat naps and she could stretch out on the bed and almost instantly start dozing — sleeping with one eye open — senses alert underneath a veneer of relaxation. No trouble now to drift off to sleep... Only thing to guard against was too deep a slumber... Just drift halfway into unconsciousness then stop, resting, but ready at the slightest... noise... noise... Not a noise connected with a patient, just a... a mosquito noise. That was it. Neglected to find that mosquito... Somewhere in the room... peculiar mosquito... doesn't come closer... buzzes for a second or two, then seems to light... there he goes again... perhaps the mosquito's sleepy too... Do mosquitoes sleep?... Why

not?... But this mosquito is drowsy... tired...

Abruptly Velma awakened. Definitely, she was going to put that annoying mosquito out of the room. She reached for her flashlight, waited to hear the mosquito once more.

She heard the peculiar buzz and snapped on the flashlight. The low-pitched buzzing noise abruptly ceased.

Velma was up out of bed with a start. That mosquito was acting peculiarly. Mosquitoes usually buzzed around in concentric circles, coming closer. This one didn't seem to like light. Perhaps she could locate him again if she switched out the light and waited in the dark.

Velma turned off the flashlight, walked over to stand at the window.

It would be daylight within an hour or two. A big moon hung low in the west, suspended over the reflecting surface of the calm ocean — a moon that was just past the full, shining in Velma's face, making a golden path to Fairyland along the ocean, flooding the grounds of the estate with a light that radiated tranquility. Somewhere across that ocean Rinkey would be flying. Not a breath of air was stirring — just the calm, limpid moonlight, the glassy surface of the ocean far below, the dark splash of shadows where... Something moved down in the yard.

Velma's eyes hardened into searching scrutiny of a dark patch of shadow that wasn't a shadow. It was an object. It had moved. It — it was a man crouched over, motionless now, apparently trying to escape attention by making it seem he was merely one of the dark shadows. But there was nothing at that spot to cast such a shadow.

The window was open. Almost without thinking, Velma released the catch on the screen, flung it back, swung her five-cell flashlight into position and pressed the button.

The beam of the light was a vivid white against the soft gold of mellow moonlight. Concentrated by the big lens into a spot of brilliance, the pencil of light just missed the crouching man. Velma swung it toward him.

Two orange spots of light centered with bluish brilliance winked at her from the darkness. Two crisp, businesslike explosions rudely ripped apart the moonlit tranquility. Two bullets crashed through the window just over Velma's head.

Involuntarily, Velma jumped back. The instinctive realization that the flashlight made her a perfect target caused her to thumb back the catch as a purely reflex action.

The man was running now — across the strip of white moonlight into the shadows, down the hedge, around by the end of the stone wall...

Two thoughts flashed through Velma Starler's mind. One was

concern for the safety of her patient. The man was running toward the cactus gardens. If he came on Banning Clarke, the shock wouldn't do Clarke's heart any good. The other thought was definite annoyance that her hair was full of the glass splinters which had rained down on her head when the bullets had crashed through the window above her.

Velma could hear sounds in the house now — bare feet thudding on the floor, voices raised in question. She'd have to get down to reassure Lillian Bradisson and her son... Just a minute more...

Banning Clarke's voice, high-pitched and querulous, yelled, "Hey!"

From the shadows down near the lower gate came another spurt of orange flame, the sound of another shot.

Almost instantly there were two answering flashes from the cactus gardens. The *pow-w-w-ie... pow-w-w-ie* of a big-caliber gun. That would be Clarke's forty-five.

Velma saw the skinny figure of Banning Clarke, attired in long underwear and nothing else, running awkwardly out of the cactus gardens toward the place where the fugitive had disappeared.

Instantly she forgot her fright. Her professional instincts came at once to the surface. "You stop that running," she called authoritatively. "That's dangerous. Go back to bed. I'll call the police. Where's Salty?"

Banning Clarke looked up at her. "What's happened? Some son-of-a-gun took a shot at me."

"He shot at me, too — shot twice — a prowler. Where's Salty?"

"Here," Salty Bowers said, emerging into the moonlight, struggling with the belt on his overalls. "Better get dressed, Banning."

For the first time, Banning became conscious of his wearing apparel, such as it was. "Oh, my *gosh!*" he said, and scuttled off into the cactus like a startled rabbit.

"Quit running," Velma shouted, her voice sharp with exasperation. "I've seen underwear before."

Chapter 5

The cattle ranch was a huge, sprawling anachronism which continued to exist within a hundred miles of Los Angeles much as it had seventy-five years ago, a tract of many thousands of acres of rolling plateau country garnished with picturesque live-oaks, canyons green with sycamore, and peaks covered with chaparral and greasewood, watched over by brooding, snow-capped mountains in the purple distance.

The cat-footed cattle horses came winding in single file down from the rugged back country, following a rough cattle trail which was all but obliterated in places. Down below, ranch headquarters rested in a little tree-studded valley. There was still a faint trace of green in the grass, but for the most part it had turned to a parched brown, tribute to the dry air, the cloudless skies, and the blazing sunlight.

Della Street, the notebook in her right saddlebag well filled with data concerning old corners, witness trees, abandoned roads, and burned fences, rode with that easy rhythm which absorbs the motion of the saddle and is so easy on both horse and rider.

“Tired?” Mason asked.

“No. I think it’s delightful.”

Harvey Brady, the owner of the ranch, half turned in the saddle and grinned. “Think you’ve got it all straight now?” he asked. “Otherwise, we can go back.”

“I think,” Della Street laughed, “I’ll settle for something to eat instead.”

The cattleman tilted the sweat-stained sombrero back on his head and looked out over his vast domain with shrewd sun-bleached eyes that saw everything. The little cavalcade hit a more traveled trail now. A cloud of reddish-gold dust enveloped them, a dust cloud heavy enough to cast a shadow in the sunlight. Fine particles of dust settled on the riders. The horses, their sides incrustated with the salt of dried perspiration, increased their rapid walk.

Down far below, a horse was standing in three-legged relaxation, head drooped forward. The reins casually dropped to the ground held him as motionless as though he’d been tied, a sure sign of the trained cattle horse.

Harvey Brady said, “Don’t know what they’ve got that horse out there for — standing in the sun. Must be waiting to pick up our dust... That’s right, here comes one of the men.”

A cowpuncher, running awkwardly in black leather chaps and high-heeled boots, emerged from the ranch house, picked up the reins,

tossed them back over the horse's neck and grasped the horn of the saddle. Instantly all awkwardness left him. The man swung into the saddle, the whirl of the horse circling him into a firm seat. Thereupon, horse and rider became merged into a streak of motion which dust-spurred across the little amphitheater of valley at a gallop, and then started climbing the zigzag trail.

The cattleman pushed his horse into swifter motion. "Looks like something's gone wrong," he said.

The courier met them within a matter of minutes, a bronzed, slim-waisted cowpuncher who reined back to the side of the trail, the horse balanced precariously on the edge of the steep slope, moving restlessly, apparently in danger of losing his footing at any moment and precipitating both himself and his rider down the sharp declivity.

The cowpuncher sat easily in the saddle, his body swaying with the motions of the horse, paying no attention to the sharp drop behind him, holding the sensitive-mouthed animal with a light hand on the reins.

"Long-distance Los Angeles operator's been trying to get Perry Mason all day. They really began burning up the wires about twenty minutes ago. They say the call's terribly important. He's to take it just as soon as he can."

"Thanks, Joe. We'll be moving right on," the cattleman said.

Della Street exclaimed, "Oh, do be careful. That horse is going to lose his balance and—"

White teeth flashed a contrast against the bronze skin. "Don't worry, ma'am. He knows that slope's there just as well as I do."

Harvey Brady spurred his horse into motion.

"Take it easy," Mason called. "All clients have a way of thinking their particular business is terribly important. But thanks for letting me know, Joe."

The cowpuncher grinned an acknowledgment. As the horses moved on past, his mount, eager to get in the lead, threw back his head, showed the whites of rolling eyes, distended red nostrils. "Thought I'd better let you know," the rider said, and then fell into place behind the little cavalcade.

The slope became less abrupt. The trail ceased to zigzag. The cattleman ahead, setting the pace, broke into a full gallop; the horses lunging up the short climbs, scurrying down the slopes, leaning far over to one side and then the other as they followed the winding turns of the cattle trail.

Mason, swinging from the saddle, seemed stiff and awkward beside the easy grace of the professional cattlemen. They clumped across a porch, opened a door marked OFFICE and entered a room with an unpainted floor splintered from the pounding of many heels.

A counter ran two thirds of the length of the room. A stove made out of a fifty-gallon gasoline drum reposed in the center of the room. A girl working over some books at a desk smiled at Perry Mason. "There's the telephone, Mr. Mason."

Mason nodded thanks, walked across to the telephone, picked up the receiver and asked for the Los Angeles operator.

Della Street saw the morning newspaper which had just been brought in with the mail. And, while waiting for the call to come through, she turned to the "Vital Statistics."

"Looking for corpses?" Mason asked, smiling.

She said, "You have no romance in your soul. You wouldn't— Oh, here it is."

"Here what is?"

"The notice of intention."

Della Street folded back the paper, circled the item in the Vital Statistics with a pencil and read: "Bowers — Brunn, Prentice C., 42, 619 Skyline, San Roberto; Lucille M., 33, 704 6th Street, San Roberto." She smiled across at Perry Mason. "I'm glad they're going ahead with it. Somehow I had an idea that romance might have hit a legal snag. There was so much—"

The telephone rang. Mason picked up the receiver.

Banning Clarke's voice, shrill with excitement, said, "This you, Mason?"

"That's right. Mason talking."

"Been trying to get you all day. They said you were just out on the ranch somewhere, so I kept thinking you'd call any minute. How big is that ranch, anyway?"

Mason laughed. "You could ride all day getting to one boundary fence and back."

"Heck, I thought it was just a ranch. Told 'em to get you about half an hour ago — couldn't wait any longer."

"So I understand. What's wrong?"

"I'm in a mess. Got to see you just as soon as you can get here."

"That may be some time the latter part of the week. I—"

"No, no. I mean right now — today — as soon as you can drive up here. They've dug up the old by-laws. Seems as though there's a regular annual stockholders' meeting due for today. They've been kind of slipping one over on me. They've got some smart lawyer coming up to put me in a jack pot."

"I'm sorry," Mason said firmly. "I've been out ever since daylight looking over a disputed boundary line and—"

"And last night somebody poisoned my mother-in-law and Jim Bradisson. Then somebody took a couple of shots at my nurse. That, and the arsenic in the food..."

Mason's face twisted into a grin. "The shooting does it. I'll be up just as soon as I can get there."

"Be sure to come to the back door," Clarke said. "I want to see you before any of the others know you're here."

Mason hung up and turned to Della Street. "Want to take a fast ride?" he asked.

"On a horse?"

"Definitely not on a horse."

"That," she announced, "is *quite* different."

The cattleman's voice was dry. "Try to get away from here without a drink and something to eat, and I'll show you what shooting *really* is."

Chapter 6

The back door of the big house was opened by Nell Sims almost as soon as Mason knocked.

“You alone?” she asked suspiciously.

“Miss Street, my secretary, is the only one with me.”

“That’s fine. Come in. The boss is anxious to see you. He told me to let him know just as soon as you came.”

“Where is he, in the cactus garden?”

“Yes.”

“And still batching?” Mason asked jovially.

“He eats one square meal every other day here,” Nell Sims snapped. “That keeps him from starving to death. The rest of the time, he eats that awful slum that he and Salty cook up. — I guess this has been a hard day for you, hasn’t it?”

Della Street and Mason followed her into the kitchen. Mason said cheerfully, “Oh, well, there’s no rest for the wicked.”

“That’s right,” Nell Sims said, regarding him in serious contemplation, “but blessed be the pure in heart, for they shall multiply as the grains of sand.”

Della Street glanced mischievously at Mason. Mason regarded Nell Sims with a coldly suspicious eye, but she met his gaze with bland innocence. “Do you,” she asked, “want something to eat?”

“Got anything without arsenic in it?” Mason asked.

“It’s a little bit early to tell, yet. Land sakes, I certainly had trouble enough getting them to eat a thing this noon. And it was even worse than that for dinner.”

“What do *you* know about the poisoning?” Mason asked.

“Absolutely nothing.”

“But surely you know in general what happened.”

“Where ignorance is bliss, a little learning is a dangerous thing,” Nell Sims proclaimed. “I don’t know anything about it, and I don’t intend to know anything about it. The police have been traipsing all over the house. As far as I’m concerned, let ‘em...”

The back door opened and Banning Clarke grinned with relief when he saw Mason. “Been sort of keeping an ear to the ground,” he said. “Thought I heard you come in. Good evening, Miss Street.”

Della smiled a greeting. Mason shook hands.

“How about some dinner?” Banning Clarke asked.

“Maybe he’s afraid of arsenic,” Nell Sims suggested. “Everybody else seems to be. People barely touched their dinners.”

Mason laughed. “We’ll take a chance. We’ve only had a few sandwiches. Bring out your arsenic.”

Nell Sims said, "There's lots of fried rabbit left. It's a case of one man's poison being another's meat."

Banning Clarke drew up a chair and sat down, jerking his thumb toward the front of the house. "They're having a regular stockholders' meeting in there. I want your advice. Should I burst in and take part in it, or should I not take part in it?"

"What do you have to gain by attending?" Mason asked.

"Nothing. Under that pooling agreement Salty can vote my stock."

"What have you to lose if you don't attend?"

"That," Clarke confessed, "is something that's been worrying me."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you."

Mrs. Sims opened the oven, took out a big pan of fried rabbit, placed tea in a teapot, poured on boiling water. "My boarders would hardly touch a thing tonight," she snorted indignantly.

Clarke said, "I'll have a cup of tea, Nell, and that's all. You folks go ahead and eat, and I'll talk while you're eating."

Della Street said, "I'm so hungry I could eat the enamel right off the plate. I hope you don't mind an unladylike exhibition of hunger."

"Why are you worried about not attending the meeting?" Mason pressed for an answer. "And what about the shooting?"

"The shooting is a mystery. Some prowler was in the yard. He shot twice at Miss Starler when she directed the beam of a flashlight toward him — the bullets struck the upper window, only about three inches apart, perhaps two feet above her head. The shots wakened me and I grabbed my old forty-five and ran out into the moonlight. He was down by the gate then. He took a shot at me, and I fired at the flash of his gun. Didn't hit him, but must have come close. This morning I found where my bullet had struck the wall, right by the lower gate — a gate that's always kept locked, by the way."

"And the poisoning?" Mason asked.

"Someone put arsenic in the saltcellar Mrs. Bradisson and her son use. A prompt diagnosis enabled the doctor to pull them through. We have Velma Starler to thank for that."

"All right," Mason said with a smile. "Now we'll come back to the original question. Why are you afraid not to attend that meeting?"

"Because... well, I... Mason, I'm going to tell you something I haven't told any other living soul, although I think Salty Bowers suspects it."

"Want me to leave?" Nell Sims asked.

"No. Stick around, Nell, I know I can trust you."

"Go ahead," Mason said, passing the rabbit to Della Street and then filling his own plate.

"Know anything about any of the famous lost mines of

California?" Clarke asked.

"Only a little."

"Ever hear of the Goler Placer Diggings?"

Mason, his mouth full of rabbit, shook his head.

"Lost mines," Nell Sims interpolated. "Lots of 'em in the desert."

Clarke put sugar in his tea, stirred the beverage, took a little blue paper-covered book from his coat pocket.

"What's that?" Mason asked.

"The Miners' Guide, compiled by Horace J. West. West collected a lot of information about the famous lost mines of California. This book was published in 1929. You'll find there are several versions of the famous lost mines — some of them sound plausible, some of them won't hold water. West went out and examined records, talked with old-time miners, compiled his history some twenty years ago, and made it as accurate as was possible."

"All right," Mason said. "What about the Goler Lost Mine?"

"Around 1886," Clarke said, "if we take West's account, three men who had been prospecting in the Panamint Range that borders Death Valley emerged from a pass in the Panamints and headed toward San Bernardino. These men were well mounted on good horses, had ample packs and ten-gallon water canteens. And they rode out into the desert filled with confidence.

"About the second day, there was a dispute as to the best way to go, and the dispute warmed up into a pretty good quarrel. Frank Goler, one of the party, thought they were heading too far to the south and west. He claimed they should keep on a more easterly course. After the quarrel, he pulled away from the others and headed pretty much east. No one knows what happened to the other two. They may have been lost in the desert. They may have come through to some destination. They may even have reached San Bernardino. So far as history is concerned, they just disappeared."

Nell Sims said briefly, "Two men get along. Three fight."

Della Street, her eyes shining with interest, paused in her eating, watching Banning Clarke. Perry Mason kept on eating rabbit.

"Want your tea now?" Nell Sims asked.

"Please," Mason said.

As she poured tea into their cups, Banning Clarke went on, "By noon two days later, Goler, pretty well spent and badly frightened, reached some low hills that sprawled out exactly in his path. He crossed them, and on the far side discovered a canyon that actually had vegetation and a little stream of water — and he reached it just in time. He was almost delirious. He flung himself down on the bank of the stream and started drinking, soaking up the water in the shade cast by a big cottonwood that was directly behind him. While he was

drinking, a little wind stirred the branches of the cottonwood and let a shaft of sunlight through that struck directly on something yellow in the stream just a few inches beyond Goler's face.

"Goler finished drinking, plunged his arm into the stream and picked up the yellow object. It was a big gold nugget, weighing several ounces. There were quite a few more lying near it on a bedrock formation in the stream. Goler picked these nuggets up and shoved them inside his shirt."

"I'd have got a sackful," Nell Sims said.

"Struck it rich, eh?" Mason asked.

"Struck it rich all right," Clarke said. "But until you've been out in the desert you haven't any idea what you're up against when you're at the mercy of the bleak, barren waste. Goler had gold, but he couldn't eat gold and he couldn't drink gold. He was a long way from civilization. His horse was tired and hungry. He himself was weak from lack of food; and suddenly the realization dawned on him that his gold wasn't worth anything whatever except in civilization. Out in the desert it was merely that much extra weight for Goler's tired horse to pack. The several gold nuggets Goler had picked up would actually lessen his chances of getting through to civilization."

"With that realization, Goler had a touch of panic. He decided to compensate for the extra weight of gold by lessening his weight as much as possible. He unbelted his six-shooter, tossed it into the brush, and spurred his horse to action. As so frequently happens with people when they're fatigued, he didn't pay too much attention to his exact location. What's more, he'd been lost — he was still lost — and that does strange things to a man's mind."

"He rode on down this canyon, then came out to more level country and saw what apparently had been the place where a big lake had evaporated and left a smooth, dry plain. Then was when he began to take his bearings. He saw that Mt. San Antonio was just about due west — we call it Old Baldy now — and that was his first landmark. There was a little mining town at the foot of an arrowhead mountain in the general direction of that peak. Goler headed for that town."

"He reached Arrowhead, and fell sick. The nuggets rubbing inside his shirt had chafed his skin raw, the wounds had become infected. His resistance to infection was low, and he lay in bed for three weeks before he could even think of getting started back to locate his claim. Three weeks can be a long time when your mind keeps constantly dwelling on one subject. After a while, your memory begins to play tricks on you."

"Certainly does," Nell Sims said, throwing the comment over her shoulder as she took more rabbit from the oven.

Clarke went on. "Well, naturally, he didn't go alone. A lot of

prospectors trailed along behind, hoping to locate claims of their own in a new bonanza. The party straggled around the desert for quite some spell. Then the prospectors got disgusted and began to drift back. It was all too plain to them that Goler, somewhere, somehow, had lost his bearings, and was wandering blind.

"Goler himself came back after about a month, rested up, got more provisions and started out again. He never did get back to that canyon — couldn't even locate the range of those hills.

"Now then, that's pretty well authenticated history. Most of it is right here in West's book. Some of it I've gleaned from other sources — about the gun, for instance. I learned that from finding a letter Goler wrote. It's in a rare collection in a library in Pasadena."

"It hardly seems possible a man could lose himself so completely," Della Street said.

"It's perfectly possible," Clarke said. "You can get lost in the desert very easily. Just think of the people who go out on hunting trips, leaving camp in the morning determined to remember exactly where it is so that they can get back at night. And when it comes to finding the camp, after a few hours' walk, they can't come close enough to locate any familiar landmarks."

Mason nodded. "That," he asked, "is the end of the Goler Mines?"

An enigmatic smile twisted Banning Clarke's lips. "Well," he said, "let's go back to Horace West's account. This, mind you, was 1886. Now, a few years later, in 1891, there was a two-fisted old prospector by the name of Hen Moss who hung out around San Bernardino and made little periodic prospecting trips out into the desert.

"Moss was making one of his regular trips, when a new burro that he had bought and was taking on its first trip decided to wander away from the rest of the outfit. You can figure how exasperated Moss was. The burro had a pack containing a lot of stuff that Moss simply had to have for his prospecting trip, and that burro just calmly took off across the desert. Moss couldn't head him off and he couldn't catch him. All he could do was trail along behind with the rest of the outfit, cussing and sputtering. That suited the burro fine. He had suddenly become the leader of the whole outfit. Well, Hen Moss tailed along behind that burro, cussing him, occasionally chasing him, then trying to wheedle him back. But a burro is a peculiar sort of customer. He gets an idea in his head and that idea is there for keeps. This burro was heading toward a barren stretch of country that Hen Moss had never been in before. No prospector had ever looked around very much in it because it was a wicked-looking, waterless country far removed from any base of supplies. In those days, such places in the desert were sure death.

"However, Hen Moss simply couldn't afford to lose the stuff that was on that burro, and he hated to lose the burro. He kept on,

thinking all the time that if he couldn't catch him within the next mile, he'd turn back and let the burro go. Then, just as he was about to give up, he found that the burro was headed toward water. — Take a burro out in the desert that way and when he begins to — head toward water you can tell it every time. However, the other animals smelled the water too, and they all began to move right along. So Moss just trailed along behind, and his burro led him right down into a canyon filled with water and rich with gold.

"As soon as Hen Moss found that gold he went completely crazy. He filled up his pockets and went delirious with joy. He ran around in circles, whooping and shouting, and then started back to San Bernardino to have the time of his life. He was about halfway back before he suddenly realized he'd been so wildly excited he hadn't even staked out a claim. For a while he hesitated about going back, but the thought of the big celebration he was going to have in San Bernardino was the determining factor. He decided to move right on into town and have one good spree, then go back to the canyon, locate his claims and do some serious mining."

"Men always make good resolutions when they're going to get drunk — and right afterwards," Nell Sims said.

Clarke smiled. "What he hadn't counted on was the reaction in San Bernardino. The town went crazy as soon as it saw Moss's gold nuggets. They knew old Hen Moss had struck it rich. And they knew that pretty soon he was going to have to go back and get more gold. So they poured liquor into him, and watched him and *kept* watching him.

"Finally old Hen got down to the bottom of his gold and couldn't buy any more booze. He began to sober up, and then realized what he was up against. He started back to his diggings, and the minute he pulled out of town, just about half of San Bernardino pulled out along with him, all of them on good horses, and packs all provisioned for a long stay in the desert.

"Hen wandered around the desert trying to throw them off his trail. He tried to pretend he'd lost the mine, tried to steal marches at night, and do about everything he could to shake them; but there was no chance. They followed along right behind—"

Banning Clarke broke off to say, "This isn't boring you, is it?"

"Exciting," Mrs. Sims remarked.

"It's remarkably interesting. I take it this is all vouched for," Mason said.

Banning Clarke tapped the little blue book. "I'm giving you history," he said; "and so there won't be any chance of getting it wrong, I'm checking up as I go along, although I know the story by heart. But this was back fifty years ago when the desert was full of

gold, and before there was any fast transportation.”

“I understand,” Mason said. “Go on. What happened to Hen Moss? Did he manage to shake his pursuers?”

“No. He finally doubled on back to San Bernardino pretty much sore and disgusted. He was stony broke, yet he knew where he could go and in a few hours pick up enough gold to make him the king of the saloons and the dancehalls. But he couldn’t move two feet out of town without all of San Bernardino moving right along with him. He tried to find some way of getting out of town without anyone knowing it. He was licked before he started. It would have been suicide to go out in the desert without packs, and San Bernardino was keeping too close a watch on him to enable him to cache some pack burros somewhere to be picked up later.”

“And this mine he’d discovered was the lost Goler claim?” Mason asked.

“I’m coming to that in a minute,” Clarke said, and then after a moment added, “It’s been generally conceded that what he discovered was the Goler claim.”

Mason became thoughtful. “I’m interested in poor old Hen Moss and his predicament. It hardly seems possible that all this could have happened in San Bernardino. Why, we go whizzing out there in an automobile, perhaps stop long enough to buy gas, and then are on our way. It seems to be just an ordinary bustling little community, modern and up to date — just a regular city.”

“There was lots that happened in San Bernardino,” Clarke said, “but the automobile blots out history. It used to be a real mining town.”

Nell Sims, standing over by the electric stove, said, “It’s a good thing those times have passed. Think of the poor people who had to run restaurants out in that country, with no ice, no electric refrigerators, no transportation.”

“They got along somehow,” Clarke said.

Mrs. Sims wagged her head dolefully. “I don’t see how. Food preservation is the first law of nature.”

“Self-preservation,” Clarke corrected.

“Well, don’t that mean food? You can’t live without food.”

Clarke winked at Mason. “The more you try to argue with her, the deeper you get.”

“That’s because I’m right,” Mrs. Sims announced with the calm finality of one who is sure of her position and doesn’t have to bother about the impression she makes on others.

“But we’re leaving Hen Moss right out in the middle of the desert,” Della Street prompted.

“Right in the middle of San Bernardino,” Clarke reminded her,

“and a mighty disgusted, disillusioned Hen Moss he was. But the old chap was something of a philosopher. So one day he whimsically observed to just about everyone in town, ‘Well, I can’t seem to get away without taking you with me, so all get packed up. We’re going to start, and this time we’re going right to the diggings. The more the merrier. If I can’t get rid of you, I’ll save a lot of time and energy just taking everyone along and not making any detours.’”

“Wore him down,” Nell Sims observed.

“And he actually meant it?” Della asked.

“Sure he meant it. Old Hen was a man of his word. He got his outfit together and waited on the outskirts of San Bernardino to make certain that everyone was along who wanted to come. Then he started out for his mine... They had characters in those days.”

“Then what happened? Were there enough claims to go around?”

Clarke smiled. “That,” he said, “is the pathetic part of it. Old Hen Moss was a good scout, generous to a fault. He’d live out in the desert for weeks at a time on the scantiest provisions imaginable, having a poorly balanced diet, absolutely alone, without anyone to talk to. And then he’d come into town and squander every cent he’d been able to scrape up. And that’s what he’d done just before he returned to his mine. As a result, the horse he was riding wasn’t the best, and Hen Moss probably wasn’t the best rider in the outfit.

“About the time the procession, after several days in the desert, got within a reasonable distance of this watered canyon, the smart ones suddenly realized that this was the end of the road. So they spurred their horses into a gallop and started ahead. Hen Moss clapped spurs into his own horse. That started the stampede. And it must have been some sight — pack horses left behind, a big cloud of desert dust rising up to the heavens, the sun beating down out of a cloudless sky, and these horsemen frantically spurring into a wild gallop over rough desert country, tearing headlong down a steep rocky slope and into a canyon! And poor old Hen Moss was just about at the tail end of the procession.

“The stampede reached the canyon. They found no claims had been staked, and men scurried madly about staking out claims. Those were the days when men had the power of quick decision, and there wasn’t any fumbling around. A man picked what he considered the best available claim, took possession, and held possession. By the time Hen Moss finally got his jaded horse down into the canyon, just about the whole creek had been staked out. Hen Moss heaved himself off his staggering horse and looked around, to see his bonanza in the possession of intruders. Eighty claims had been located ahead of him. The one that Hen Moss finally located was just about the poorest of the whole outfit.”

"The law of retribution," Nell Sims said.

"And that was the Goler Placer?" Mason asked, realizing by this time that no one ever paid the slightest attention to Nell Sims' chirping interpolations.

"That was *considered* to be the Goler Placer. Mining men looked the territory over, remembered the story Goler had told, and decided it was the Goler claim."

"And it was?" Mason asked.

"It was not."

Della Street ceased eating to watch Clarke.

"Goler," Clarke went on, "wasn't quite as simple as he seemed to be. The story that he told of the location of his bonanza didn't quite fit the actual facts. The description of the location was doctored just enough so it would fool anyone who wanted to go trailing along behind him, and keep him from being outdistanced at the last by younger men on fresher horses, the way Hen Moss was. Goler was smarter than Moss. He deliberately fabricated the description of the country in which his mine was located."

"How," Mason asked, "do you know?"

"Fair question," Mrs. Sims chirped.

Banning Clarke looked furtively around the kitchen.

"It's all right," Nell Sims reassured him. "They're all in that meeting. Hayward Small nearly always comes in for a cup of tea this time of night, but he won't be in as long as that meeting's going."

Clarke opened his coat, hitched a holster into sight which had once been black but was now faded to a dark brown and polished with much wear. "I want to keep this pretty much out of sight."

His hand dropped to the holster, snaked out the weapon and placed it on the table.

Mason, Della Street and Mrs. Sims bent over it.

It was a worn, badly rusted single-action Colt revolver. Whatever the finish had originally been, it was now buried under the deep incrustations of rust which had formed a deep, shell over barrel, cylinder, and trigger. The yellowed ivory handle alone had completely resisted the elements. And etched in that ivory handle was the word *Goler*, and, below that, a date, 1882.

Mason gave a low whistle.

"I found that," Clarke said, "purely by accident near a little trickling spring beneath some cottonwoods in the desert. The man who was with me had gone off to do some climbing. It was before my heart got as bad as it became later, but even then I was troubled with shortness of breath and was trying to take things easy. I stretched out in the shade of the cottonwood. About three inches of the barrel of this gun was protruding from the ground by the side of the spring. I

saw that it was. part of a gun barrel and dug it out, looked at it curiously for a minute, then saw the name Goler and the date — and then knew what I'd found."

"What did you do?" Della Street asked, her eyes big and shining with excitement.

"I didn't have any tools or equipment with me," Clarke said, "but I grubbed around in the bottom of the stream a bit with just my bare hand. There was a little pocket right next to the bedrock, and I scooped out gravel that was thick with gold."

"But how does it happen no one has ever heard about this?" Mason asked.

"That," Clarke said, "is the rub. The ground on which that spring was located was part of a quartz claim on which some poor befuddled prospector was starving to death, trying to find rock that would be worth mining. The idea of placer gold on the place had apparently never occurred to anyone. Hang it, the Come-Back Mining Syndicate has an interest in that claim right now, thinking that it holds only a quartz mine of problematical value. Only one of hundreds of similar mining propositions that it's bought up. And I'm not going to pour any more money into the laps of Mrs. Bradisson and her infallible son, James."

"Anyone any idea you know about the location of this mine?" Mason asked.

"I think Bradisson does."

Mason raised his eyebrows.

"Out there in Salty's camp I have no place to keep anything of this nature, so I left the gun in a drawer in my desk — left it with the side of the handle that had Goler's name etched on it turned *down*. Well, a week or so ago, I found that side turned *up*. I don't often get up to my room now — it's a job for me to climb the stairs. I have to take it mighty easy when I go up, resting for a minute or two every second or third step. You see, I have—"

The swinging door creaked on its hinges. Banning Clarke's hand shot out to the old rust-covered six-shooter, jerked it back out of sight and into the holster.

The door opened. A girl of somewhere around twenty, a lithe girl in a sweater who knew she looked well in a sweater, drew back as she saw the compact little group around the table. "Am I intruding?"

Banning Clarke said, "Not at all, Dorina. Come in. This is Mr. Mason and Miss Della Street, his secretary. — And this is Dorina Crofton, Mrs. Sims' daughter by her former marriage. — I was just explaining something to Mr. Mason, Dorina, but it's all right now."

Clarke turned to the lawyer. "So you see the peculiar position in which I find myself — particularly with reference to the corporation."

“Do they,” Mason asked, “have any suspicion of the true facts?”

“I think they have.”

“I mean the legal title — the ownership of the property that is — er — involved?”

“Yes.”

Mason’s eyes narrowed. “You say they have an attorney at that meeting?”

“Yes. Chap named Moffgat. You may know him. He was my wife’s lawyer. He handled her estate. Then Bradisson started going to him. Moffgat represented their side in the litigation over the stock. I don’t think he cherishes any great love for me — and I know I don’t for him.”

“He’s attending that directors’ meeting?” Mason asked.

“Oh, yes. He has a finger in every pie the corporation cooks these days.”

“Look here,” Mason said suddenly, “when you resigned as president did you resign as a director also?”

Clarke nodded.

Mason said, with a trace of irritation in his voice, “You should have told me this before I drew up that pooling agreement.”

“Why? What’s that got to do with it?”

“Suppose,” Mason said, “they put you up as a director in the corporation. Salty is in there, voting your stock under that pooling agreement. That would be the same as though you voted for yourself. Once you become a director you’re acting in a fiduciary capacity. If you have knowledge affecting the value of corporate assets and fail to give the corporation the benefit of that knowledge — Get Salty out of that meeting before they can do anything about—”

“The meeting’s all finished, Mr. Mason,” Dorina said. “I heard the chairs scraping back just as I came by the room.”

Clarke looked at Mason. “Isn’t there some way I can beat that?”

Mason shook his head. “The minute you become a qualified director, even if it’s only for a few minutes, you’re licked. You can’t withhold this information and then subsequently... Wait a minute — under the by-laws does a director have to be a stockholder?”

“I believe he does,” Clarke said.

“What’s your stock worth?”

“Three or four hundred thousand, anyway, and perhaps more. Why?”

“I want to buy it,” Mason said, and added with a grin, “for five dollars. I’ll have a private understanding with you that I’ll sell it back to you for five dollars and five cents day after tomorrow, but no one is to know of that agreement.”

“I can’t hurry up those stairs,” Clarke said. “It’s up in my desk on

the second floor, in the third pigeonhole from the right.”

“Desk locked?” Mason asked, getting to his feet.

“No. There’s a lock, but it won’t work. I’ve been intending to have it fixed. A key broke off in it. Suppose you could find — Dorina, how about showing Mr. Mason the way to my room? You can go up the back stairs.”

Dorina, standing by the table, seemed for the moment not to have heard him.

Mrs. Sims said, “Dorina, honey, wake up. Look out — don’t upset the sugar! Mr. Clarke wants you to take Mr. Mason up to his room.”

“Oh, yes. Certainly.” She smiled with the vague expression of a person waking from a sound sleep. “Will you come this way, please, Mr. Mason?”

Mason said, “Here is your five dollars, Clarke. Consider the sale completed.”

Clarke lowered his voice. “If you hear the meeting breaking up, Mason, and find you can’t possibly make it, you know what to do.”

Mason held up his right hand, made a signing motion and raised his eyebrows.

Clarke nodded.

“That,” Mason said, “would make complications.”

“I know, but we can’t afford to let them catch us in that trap.”

Mason caught Dorina by the arm. “Come on, young lady,” he said.

Dorina Crofton led the way up a flight of back stairs. Wordlessly she hurried down the corridor.

“You seem to be a young woman of deep thoughts,” Mason said.

She gave him the smile which politeness demanded, said after a moment, “I guess I’m rather quiet today. This is Mr. Clarke’s room.”

Mason, who had been prepared for a sumptuous master’s bedroom, found himself surprised at the small room on the north side of the house. It contained a plain single bed, a bureau, a chest of drawers, a somewhat battered table, an old-fashioned roll-top desk, and a dozen or so framed photographic enlargements. A couple of coiled rawhide ropes hung on the wall. A pair of big roweled Mexican spurs hung between the two ropes. From the other wall, a worn rifle scabbard, still holding a gun, was suspended at an angle from a peg placed in the wall. A glass-enclosed gun cabinet held an assortment of rifles and shotguns. The skin of a big mountain lion was stretched along the third wall. At one time the room had evidently been an intimate part of a man’s personality, but now it had not been lived in enough to keep the atmosphere of warm friendliness and human occupancy which should have been a part of such a room. It had been kept scrupulously clean, yet it was a stiffly starched cleanliness that

seemed divorced from the swirling currents of everyday activity.

Mason crossed over to the desk, pulled out the papers in the pigeonhole Banning Clarke had mentioned. He found the envelope containing the stock certificate, took it out, looked at it, saw that it was in order, and was just starting for the door when, from the lower floor, there came the sudden sound of several people talking at once, of footsteps gravitating toward the back part of the house, and that general bustle of activity which attends the breaking up of a meeting.

Mason stood still frowning at the stock certificate.

"What's the matter?" Dorina Crofton asked.

Mason said, "The sale is completed, the certificate should have been signed before that meeting broke up."

"Will it make any difference?" Dorina asked.

"It may make a lot of difference. Do you suppose there's any way you could rush this certificate down to him before they get to the kitchen and—"

"They're headed out that way now. I think they're looking for him."

Mason abruptly sat down at the desk, whipped out his fountain pen, pulled papers out of the pigeonholes until he found one bearing the signature of Banning Clarke.

He flashed a quick glance over his shoulder at Dorina Crofton.

She seemed completely unaware of what was going on, her mind apparently entirely occupied with some personal problem which absorbed her entire attention.

Mason spread the stock certificate out, placed the paper containing Banning Clarke's signature just above it. For a moment he studied the signature; then, with a swift, sure touch, made a somewhat amateurish job of signing Banning Clarke's name to an endorsement transferring the stock.

He replaced the paper from which he had copied Clarke's signature, folded the stock certificate, pushed it down into his pocket and screwed the cap on his fountain pen.

"All ready," he said.

Dorina moved silently out into the corridor. Mason felt certain that she had been so completely absorbed in what she was thinking that the significance of his act had not dawned on her.

They were all in the kitchen by the time Mason got there — Lillian Bradisson, who carried a little too much flesh and used just a bit too much make-up; Jim Bradisson, outwardly affable and good-natured in his friendliness; Moffgat the lawyer, stocky, well tailored, with hair that had been combed back so that every strand, glistening with hairdressing, was held in just the right position; Hayward Small, a wiry chap with quick, restless eyes and Salty Bowers, seeming

completely detached from the others.

Mason gave them the benefit of a lightning survey and had them catalogued in his mind even before they became aware of his scrutiny.

Banning Clarke performed perfunctory introductions, and it seemed to Mason that the others were almost effusive in their cordiality. Moffgat particularly went out of his way to be friendly, although retaining somewhat of a careful reserve.

"I have just learned," Moffgat said, "that you are to represent Mr. and Mrs. Sims in that fraud action. It will indeed be an honor to have such a famous opponent, Mr. Mason. I've seen you in court several times. I'm not certain that you place me — Moffgat & Steele, attorneys in the Brokaw Building." He gravely tendered Mason a card.

Mason slipped the card into his pocket and said, "I haven't had time to familiarize myself with the issues involved in that fraud action."

"No hurry, no hurry," Moffgat said. "I think as soon as you hear the evidence, Mr. Mason, you'll decide not to contest the action. In the meantime, Mr. Clarke, we have some good news for you."

"What is it?" Clarke asked, his voice and manner coldly impersonal.

"It has occurred to us," Moffgat said, "that because of various litigation and other things, the corporation has really done you an injustice. You aren't physically able to go out on the properties and take an active part in their operation, but you do have certain highly specialized knowledge; and the company feels that it owes you a debt of gratitude for the work you have done in developing the mining property. In short, Mr. Clarke, we have elected you to a place on the board of directors, and have employed you as supervising manager at a salary of twenty-five thousand dollars a year and all incidental expenses."

Clarke looked surprised.

Mason said, "I am sorry, Moffgat, but it's no go."

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said. It's a cleverly baited trap, but it won't work."

Moffgat said angrily, "I don't know what right you have to make any such statement. We are trying to bury the hatchet, that's all."

Mason smiled at him. "I will tell you something else, Counselor. The election of Clarke to the board of directors is invalid."

"What do you mean?"

"Directors have to be stockholders in the corporation."

"Banning Clarke is a very large stockholder, Mr. Mason."

"He *was*," Mason said. "It happens that he's sold his stock."

"The books of the corporation don't show it."

"They will when — the stock is presented for transfer."

"But on the books of the corporation he's still a stockholder. He —"

Mason pulled Banning Clarke's stock certificate from his pocket, spread it out on the table.

"The question," he said, "is whether Banning Clarke actually is a stockholder, and I think this answers the question. Gentlemen, *I* have bought Clarke's stock."

Moffgat became angry. "That stock purchase," he said, "is just a subterfuge."

Mason grinned. "Would you like to go to court and ask to have the transfer set aside on the grounds that you engineered a trap for Clarke, hoping that he would walk into it, and that he avoided it by selling his stock?"

"It wasn't a trap, I tell you. We were trying to extend an olive branch."

Nell Sims said in the peculiarly chirping tone of voice which she reserved for interpolations, "Fear the Greeks when they bear olive branches."

Mason said suavely, "Well, perhaps I have been a little hasty."

"I think you have."

"Would you," Mason asked, "make that contract of employment on an annual basis — provide that the contract couldn't be terminated by the corporation except on twelve months' notice?"

Moffgat flushed. "Certainly not."

"Why?"

"Well, there are... there are reasons."

Mason nodded to Banning Clarke. "There you are," he said.

Clarke said, "I am satisfied to leave the entire matter in your hands, Mason."

Mason folded the stock certificate and put it in his pocket.

"May I ask what you paid for that?" Moffgat asked.

"Certainly," Mason observed.

Moffgat waited for a further reply.

"You are at liberty to *ask*" Mason said, smiling.

James Bradisson injected himself into the conversation. "Come, come. Let's not have any hard feelings about it. As far as I am concerned I don't want Banning Clarke to feel there's any personal animosity. Frankly, Moffgat said that if we could elect him to a position on the board of directors and give him this contract, we could jockey him into a situation where either he would have to disclose everything he knew about the company property, or — if he ever exploited or developed it in his own name and for his own benefit — we could go to court and establish that he was acting as an

involuntary trustee for the company. Come on, Moffgat, you have had your fling and you came out second best. Mason anticipated what you were up to and beat you to it. And I, for one, am just as well pleased. I am tired of lawsuits. Now let us forget our business differences and be friends. - Banning, I don't suppose there is any chance of reaching an agreement and getting you to give us certain information that you have, is there?"

"What information?"

"You know what I mean."

Banning gained time by extending his teacup for Mrs. Sims to fill. "So it was a trap?" he asked.

"Sure it was," Bradisson said, as Moffgat, taking a quick breath, apparently started to deny it. "Now then, let's talk of something else."

Mrs. Sims, carrying the teapot around the table to refill the teacups of Della Street and Perry Mason, asked, "What about *my* case?"

Moffgat, in a cold rage, said, "I am glad you mentioned it. It's one of the things I wanted to discuss. But it probably would be better to discuss it in the absence of your client, Mr. Mason."

"Why in my absence?" Mrs. Sims asked.

Moffgat said, shortly, "You might get angry."

"Not me," Mrs. Sims said. "I didn't have a thing to do with it. All I want to know is where I stand."

Mason said, "I left instructions to have a demurrer filed this afternoon in that case."

Mrs. Bradisson, who had kept in the background, said, "James, I suppose we have discharged our obligations as directors and can go now."

Bradisson seemed somewhat reluctant to leave.

Dorina Crofton walked around the table, stood by the corner, then impulsively crossed over to the place near the stove where her mother was standing, and kissed her.

"What's that for?" Mrs. Sims asked.

"For luck," Dorina said, laughing.

There was a moment of general confusion with people moving around the big kitchen, Bradisson holding the door open for his mother, Mason on his feet bowing and expressing his pleasure at having met the others.

As the swinging door to the kitchen closed on the parting directors, Moffgat said, "I have a stipulation I'd like you to sign, Mason. I've left my brief case in the other room. If you'll pardon me a moment..."

"Watch him," Clarke said tersely when Moffgat had left the room. "He's full of tricks. He's putting something up to Jim right now. That

business of leaving his brief case was just a stall."

Mason said in a low, hurried voice, "That stipulation probably means he wants to take the deposition of Pete Sims. He *may* want to take yours."

"Why?"

Mason smiled. "A general fishing expedition. Once he gets you before a notary public, he will start asking questions designed to trap you in connection with this other matter. Sorry I had to do what I did with reference to that stock, but we were working against minutes."

"Quite all right," Clarke said, laughing.

"You see," Mason said, "I didn't have time to explain it to you, but the law in regard to corporation directors is rather obscure. It isn't like being elected to some office where you have to qualify by taking an oath of office. Under the pooling agreement your shares were voted by Salty. Naturally, Salty thought they were doing you a favor putting you on the board of directors."

Salty Bowers said sheepishly, "They were so doggone nice about it, I thought they were really and truly trying to patch up all the differences. I feel like kicking myself."

"No need to feel that way," Mason said. "It was a clever legal trap."

"Darn clever," Banning Clarke said. "But I suppose if they ever get to checking up on the time element there was a period of five or ten minutes during which I actually was a director and therefore—"

Mason frowned, glanced warningly toward Nell Sims.

Banning Clarke laughed. "She's all right. I would trust her and Dorina with my life."

Mason said, "Well, just to make this thing legal and get me out of a mess in case there should be an investigation, take your pen and trace over the signature on this stock certificate. I want you to do it in the presence of witnesses. I'd particularly like to have Dorina Crofton here to see you do it because she was with me when—"

"I'm afraid she's left," Nell Sims interrupted. "That's the way with youngsters these days — go streaking out just as soon as they get an opportunity. Time was, when I was a girl, that you wouldn't think of going out without getting your parents' permission."

"She's a mighty good girl," Banning Clarke said with feeling.

"She's all right, the way girls go nowadays," Mrs. Sims announced; "but she's too independent."

"Not too independent," Nell Sims sniffed. "Children overdo it. As the twig is bent, so the branch is broken."

Banning Clarke grinned at Mason and took out his fountain pen, and Mason unfolded the stock certificate.

"When Moffgat comes back," Mason said, "if it looks as though he

has any papers to serve on you, I'll cough twice. When I do, make some excuse to get out, and then keep under cover so he can't serve you with a subpoena. I distrust that man and—"

The swinging door pushed open, Moffgat was talking almost as he entered the room. "Well, Mr. Mason, I am hoping our adverse interests as counsel won't interfere with our friendly relations." He was smiling affably now, and his manner had undergone a complete change, as though Jim Bradisson had given him definite instructions to try a new approach.

Mason whipped the stock certificate out from under Banning Clarke's hand before the pen had a chance to touch the paper. Under cover of reaching across the table for the teapot, he folded the stock certificate and slipped it in the inside pocket of his coat.

Moffgat noticed the fountain pen in Banning Clarke's hand, frowned with concentration, but said suavely enough, "I have here stipulation, Mr. Mason, for the taking of the deposition of Peter Sims, one of the defendants in that fraud case. I'd like to take the deposition tomorrow if that isn't too short notice. I think it's vitally important to have a clarification of the issues." Moffgat pulled a cardboard filing jacket from his brief case, opened it, and handed Mason a blue-backed legal document.

Della Street, sitting at Mason's side, glanced toward the filing jacket and nudged Mason's elbow.

Mason coughed twice.

Banning Clarke pushed back his chair, said, "Excuse me. I will get a drink of water."

He moved over toward the sink, glanced toward the table, saw that Mason was reading the stipulation with the greatest care, that Moffgat was watching him with slightly narrowed eyes.

Quietly, Banning Clarke slipped out through the back door.

Mason said, "If we are going to take the deposition of Pete Sims as one party to the controversy, I'd like to take the deposition of James Bradisson at the same time."

"Why do you want his deposition?"

"He's the president of the corporation, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"And the one with whom Pete Sims had his dealings shortly prior to the execution of the contract which is now claimed to be fraudulent?"

"Yes."

"I want his deposition," Mason said. "If you're going to take the deposition of one party, I want the deposition of the other."

Moffgat yielded the point reluctantly. "Interline it in pen and ink," he said. "And while you are doing it, put in the name Banning

Clarke.”

“He’s not a party to the controversy. You have no right to take his deposition,” Mason said.

Moffgat’s smile was crafty. “He is in poor health. I have a right to take a deposition to perpetuate his testimony. He’s a material witness.”

“To what?”

“To something connected with this controversy.”

“What?”

“I’ll disclose that at the proper time.”

“Then I won’t include his name in the stipulation,” Mason said.

Moffgat said, “You don’t have to. I have anticipated your refusal and secured a court order and a subpoena. Under those circumstances, since it will save your client the annoyance and embarrassment of having the subpoena served on him, you’d better have his name included in the deposition.”

Mason merely inserted in pen and ink the words, “*Also the deposition of James Bradisson, at the same time and place.*”

Moffgat seemed definitely annoyed. “I warn you, Mr. Mason, that I shall serve that subpoena at the first available opportunity without regard for the convenience of Banning Clarke.”

“That,” Mason announced, slipping his fountain pen back into his pocket, “is your privilege.”

Moffgat blotted Mason’s signature, signed his own name, handed Mason a copy of the stipulation, returned the filing jacket to his brief case.

“And now,” he said, “if you’ll pardon me, I’ll join the Bradissons. I’ll see you tomorrow, Counselor.”

He had no sooner left the room than Mrs. Sims, walking over to the icebox, said, “I’ve got something in here to take the taste of that lawyer out of your mouth. I wasn’t going to bring it out while he was here because he’d be wanting a piece.”

She took out a lemon pie. The dark gold of the browned top was dotted with little amber-colored globules.

Mason glanced at Della Street, then smiled contentedly. “If I were a cat,” he said to Mrs. Sims, “I’d stretch out in front of the fireplace and start purring.”

Salty looked at his watch. “Gee, I’m sorry I walked into that trap, Mr. Mason.”

“You don’t need to be. It was cleverly baited. Look here, Salty — Moffgat is going to slip out there and try to serve that subpoena on Banning Clarke. Do you suppose Banning can keep out of his way?”

Salty chuckled. “Give him ten seconds’ head start out there in the dark and the Devil himself couldn’t find him!”

Chapter 7

When Mason and Della Street had finished their pie, Mason said, "Well, I guess we'd better go have a talk with Banning Clarke. Hope he didn't get too excited."

Salty Bowers fidgeted uneasily, suddenly blurted, "I wish you'd wait for just a minute."

Mason elevated his eyebrows in a silent question.

"The woman I'm going to marry is coming in — Lucille Brunn. I told her to be here by eight-thirty, and she'll be right on the dot. I — well, I'd like to have you meet her."

Mrs. Sims, clearing off the table, said, "Trouble with Banning Clarke is he's always been active and he can't slow down. If he would just take life real easy for a while, he could get well but about the time he gets half cured, he goes and tears himself down again. Gets right back to where he started."

"He's coming along all right," Salty said defensively.

"I ain't so certain. He looked bad tonight. And if Miss Brunn is coming here, Salty Bowers, you get out of my kitchen so I can get my work done. It's a wonder," she went on, sputtering as she attacked the stacked dishes with swift competence, "that I get any work done at all, what with people using my kitchen for directors' meetings and what not. Police find poison in the food and ask *me* how it got there. How should I know, with everyone traipsing around the kitchen? And that slick promoter — whisks my daughter right out of the kitchen and leaves her Ma with all the dishes. Now that boy friend she had who went in the Army, Jerry Coslet, wouldn't ever do anything like that. Girls used to do the dishes before they'd go out, back when there was some consideration shown to parents..."

Salty Bowers grinned across at Mason. "We may as well go into the living-room. She'll go on and on like this..."

"Seems like men don't have no consideration for women nowadays," Nell Sims went on. "They just don't stop to think. Lucille wants to make a good impression on your lawyer friend, and you bring her into a kitchen! — Land sakes! What's this?"

Mrs. Sims picked up the sugar bowl, and under it a folded paper began slowly straightening out as the weight of the bowl was removed from it.

"Looks like a note," Della Street said.

Mrs. Sims spread it open, held it out at arm's length, and squinted her eyes. "There," she said, "I've gone and forgotten my glasses again. Something's written on it all right, but I can't read it without my specs." She handed it to Della Street. "You've got young eyes. Suppose

you read it.”

Della Street glanced through it hastily. “It’s from your daughter, Mrs. Sims. Do you want me to read it out loud or—”

“Certainly I do. What’s the idea of Dorina slipping notes under the sugar bowl? Why didn’t she come right out and say anything she had to tell me?”

Della Street said, “The note says: ‘Dear Mom — Hayward has been after me to go to Las Vegas and get married. I’ve been trying to make up my mind all day. I still don’t know the answer. But if I’m not home by midnight, you will know what’s happening. If you don’t like it, don’t try to stop us, because you can’t. Love—. And it’s signed with just the initial D.’”

Mrs. Sims slowly dried her hands on the dish towel. “Can you beat that!” she demanded.

Salty Bowers said, “Well, if she is in love with him, and—”

Nell Sims sputtered. “*If* she’s in love with him! The idea of a girl leaving a note like that when she’s going away to get married. Land sakes! If she’d been in love with him, she’d tear the house down getting started. Been thinking it over all day and can’t make up her mind! It’s a wonder she wouldn’t ask her Ma for a little advice. I could have told her. Looks good to her now because all of the younger men are in the Army. These birds that are left look like picture actors to the girls, because the girls ain’t seen any young men in civilian clothes for so long they’ve forgotten what they look like. You wait until these young men start coming back. Why, land sakes, when Jerry Coslet gets back, this Hayward Small will look like an old dodo to Dorina. — That’s the way with girls these days, won’t ask their mothers for any advice. Think they know everything. Soak up a little sophisticated patter and think they can brush life off to one side with wisecracks.”

Mason said, “Your daughter seems to be a very level-headed young woman, Mrs. Sims. Perhaps she’s been taking all of these things into consideration.”

“She’s a good girl,” Mrs. Sims said positively. “A mighty good girl, and she’ll be all right. You just can’t make a sow’s ear out of a silk purse, no matter how hard you try.”

“That’s right,” Mason observed, smiling.

Salty Bowers, standing awkwardly ill at ease, said, “Lucille is just about due and...”

“You get out of my kitchen,” Nell Sims said. “Go on, all of you now. Get out of the kitchen.”

Della Street said, “Let me help with the dishes, Mrs. Sims. There’s quite a stack here, and after all, *I’m* not trying to make any romantic impression.”

Nell Sims' black eyes swung to Della Street. "Well, if you're not, you should be," she snapped. "Land sakes! The way some educated people are so blind they can't see... Go on, all of you. Get out of my kitchen."

"She means it," Salty grinned.

Della Street flashed her a quick smile. "It was a very nice dinner, Mrs. Sims. And I'm quite certain your daughter will be all right."

"Of course she'll be all right. I just wish you could have seen Jerry Coslet the day... That's the worst of it, she hasn't seen her friends. Been hanging around the kitchen too much. Just a case of absence making the heart grow fonder of the bird in hand. — Wait until I see that Hayward Small. I'll give him a piece of my mind. Son-in-law or no son-in-law, I'll tell him. — Go on now. Get out, all of you. Lucille Brunn's going to come any minute and if she gets into this kitchen she — go on, get out of here."

In the living-room. Mason grinned at Salty Bowers. "She even shook her apron at us," he said, "shooing us out of the kitchen as if we were a bunch of chickens."

"She's a character," Salty grinned. "Out in Mojave the boys used to come in and egg her on just to hear her talk. She—"

He broke off as the doorbell sounded.

Salty Bowers excused himself, hurried to the door, returned with an air of beaming pride. "Lucille, this is Mr. Mason," then suddenly realizing that he should have introduced Della Street first, corrected himself hastily, "*Miss Street and Mr. Mason.*"

Lucille Brunn had a small face, dark, intense eyes and a quick, nervous manner. She tactfully turned to acknowledge the introduction to Della Street first, then gave Mason her hand.

Bowers said, "We're getting married day after tomorrow and going to head out into the desert for a honeymoon."

"You've lived in the desert?" Della Street asked Miss Brunn.

"No. I'm getting acquainted with it through Salty," she laughed.

"The desert," Salty announced, "is the best mother a man ever had. You do what she wants you to and she's kind to you. She trains you to do your thinking for yourself, too, and that's good; but just you forget about her laws, and you've got trouble on your hands — lots of trouble. A man don't make a mistake only once in the desert."

It was a long speech for Salty, and showed the depth of his feeling.

Della Street said politely to Lucille Brunn. "I hope you'll be happy out in Salty's desert. He makes it sound very tempting."

"I'm certain I will," and then, with a quick, nervous laugh, "I'll be happy anywhere with Salty."

The door from the hallway opened and Velma Starler, hurriedly

entering the room, brought up to a sharp stop at sight of Perry Mason and Della Street.

"Oh, hello. I didn't know you were planning to be here. It isn't... I mean my patient hasn't had any trouble?"

"None whatever," Mason said. "He simply asked me to come up on a business matter."

"Oh! I'm relieved. Dr. Kenward insisted I should take an afternoon off. He said he'd send out another nurse for the day, but Mr. Clarke made such a to-do about it that the doctor let it go. You see," she went on to explain, "we had a rather hectic night. But how about you folks? You've been at the beach?"

"Riding," Mason said. "That accounts for the sunburn. We were in the saddle all day."

"I love to ride," Velma said, and then, turning to Lucille, "Been here long, Lucille?"

"Just arrived."

"What's happened? Anything new?"

"I haven't heard of anything. Try and get Salty to tell you anything, even if he knows it." She laughed. "When it comes to information, he's a one-way street."

Mason said, "It seems that this was the date for the regular stockholders' meeting of the mining corporation. They brought up their attorney and tried to use an olive branch as cover for a little scheme."

"Moffgat?" she asked.

Mason lit a cigarette, nodded. "Rather an energetic schemer."

"I'm afraid of him," Lucille Brunn said, in a low voice to Salty.

"Why?"

"I don't like his eyes."

Mason cleared his throat, ground out his cigarette in the ash tray, said nothing.

"Well, I'll run along and take a look at my patient," Velma said cheerfully, "before I change my clothes — just make certain that he's all right. I'll have to run up and get a flashlight."

"Nice girl," Salty remarked when she had left. "Well, Lucille and I will be on our way — be seeing you folks again."

Della Street watched them out of the door, said musingly, "He certainly is terribly in love with her."

"You'd think she was the only woman on earth to watch him," Mason agreed. "His eyes keep feasting on her."

"She is, as far as he's concerned," Della said. "It must be nice to be loved like that."

Mason smiled. "They say all the world loves a lover. I'd say that all the feminine part of it does. Show a woman a romance and her

eyes begin to sparkle.”

Della laughed. “I wonder what Mrs. Sims would do to that proverb to twist it around and still make sense. I wasn’t aware my eyes were shining. As a matter of fact, I’m feeling low, terribly low. While you are driving me home I am going to—” She broke off to clear her throat.

“Probably you’ve had too much exertion,” Mason said. “That long horseback ride and...”

“No, it isn’t that type of fatigue. I—Is your throat all right?”

“Yes, why?”

“There’s a peculiar burning sensation in mine — a metallic taste.”

Mason, suddenly solicitous, said, “Whoa! Wait a minute. You are not letting your mind play tricks on you, are you?”

“I don’t think so.”

Mason looked at her face, stepped forward and placed his hand over hers.

“Della, you *are* sick!”

She tried to smile. “Something I’ve eaten has most certainly disagreed with me. I am — I am a little nauseated. I wonder where they keep the bathrooms in this house.”

Mason strode across to the plate-glass window, pulled back the drapes, looked out into the shadowy darkness of the big yard. The little spot made by a flashlight bobbing along marked the place where Velma Starler was walking. She had not as yet quite reached the stone wall of varicolored rock.

Mason flung up a side window. “Oh, Miss Starler,” he called.

The beam of the flashlight stopped abruptly.

“As soon as it’s convenient can you take a look at Miss Street?” Mason asked.

“What’s the matter?” she called.

“She’s been taken suddenly ill.”

For a moment the flashlight hesitated, then became a spot of brilliance as the nurse whirled in her tracks and started running towards the house.

A few moments later, breathless and plainly alarmed, she was in the dining-room. “Where is she? What’s the matter?”

“She went in search of a bathroom. She has nausea and was complaining of a metallic taste—”

Velma Starler dashed from the room without waiting for Mason to finish.

It was a good ten minutes before she returned. Her face was grave. “I’ve telephoned for Dr. Kenward. He’ll be over right away.”

“What is it?” Mason asked.

She said gravely, “I’m afraid it’s serious, Mr. Mason. It has all of

the symptoms of arsenic poisoning. She — But, Mr. Mason, you're looking... Are *you* all right?"

"Do the symptoms of arsenic poison," Mason asked with calm dignity, "include a burning sensation, nausea, griping pains in the abdomen, and a metallic taste in the throat?"

"Yes. Are you—"

Mason said, "When Dr. Kenward comes, tell him he has two patients," and collapsed into a chair.

Chapter 8

Dr. Kenward, by an almost imperceptible motion of his head, indicated he wished Velma to join him for a conference, and then moved toward the dining-room.

Velma Starler joined him after a few seconds, finding him seated in a chair at the dining-room table, leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, gazing somewhat dejectedly at the carpet.

No longer was Dr. Kenward the cool, efficient master of the sickroom, the quickly decisive, perfectly poised medical man whose calm professional competence could not be shattered by emergencies, the hysteria of patients, or those diabolical coincidences of fate when everything seems to go wrong at once.

The man who sat on the edge of the dining-room chair, his elbows propped on his knees, his body sagging with weariness, was merely a very tired, very much overworked, and somewhat distraught mortal who had reached the limit of his endurance. He looked up as Velma entered the room, and she was shocked as some trick of lighting threw into undue prominence the dark circles of weariness under his eyes.

Recognizing that this was not a case where the nurse should remain standing in the presence of the doctor, but a matter of two tired human beings bound together by a common interest, Velma drew up a chair and seated herself at his side.

For the space of nearly a minute he was silent. Velma, waiting for him to speak, later on realized that he had no desire to talk for the moment, but was drawing a certain amount of strength from her presence.

She offered him her package of cigarettes.

Silently, he took one. And she was the one to stroke the match and hold the flame cupped in her hands to light both cigarettes.

The silence was not in any way strained, nor was it embarrassing. It was as though a cloak of wordless understanding had thrown itself about them, shutting off, for the moment, cares and worries of the outside world.

It was Dr. Kenward who at length broke the silence. "Thanks to the fact that you had the antidote on hand, I don't think it will be serious."

"Arsenic?" she asked.

"Undoubtedly. Perhaps not a very large dose, but nevertheless arsenic."

Several seconds later he sighed wearily, then said, "I'm afraid what you told me about Banning Clarke didn't completely register —

all the little details. Would you mind very much repeating what you told me?"

"Not at all," she said.

He sucked in a deep drag from the cigarette, then placed his head back against the chair, exhaled slowly, and closed his eyes.

Velma said, "I was on my way to see Banning Clarke when Mr. Mason called. I telephoned you and then washed out the stomachs and administered the ferric solution. Then I dashed out to see how Mr. Clarke was getting along.

"You know how the pathway runs along the side of that rock wall, then swerves around the big clump of cactus and winds in and out through the sand around the cactus patches. — I was running just as fast as I dared — so fast that for a moment I couldn't realize the significance of what I saw... or rather, what I failed to see."

She paused and peered at him sharply as though wondering whether the closed eyes and relaxed muscles indicated he'd drifted off into the slumber of physical exhaustion.

"Proceed," he said without so much as flickering his eyes.

"You know how they slept — Salty Bowers on the north side of the little sand cove, and Banning Clarke down to the south near the wall. Well, I had actually run past the fireplace before I suddenly realized what was the matter. Neither sleeping bag was there."

"And there was no sign of Clarke?" he asked.

"None whatever. Both sleeping bags were gone, the cooking utensils were gone, the jalopy that they used to drive around with is missing, and there's no sign of Banning Clarke or Salty Bowers."

"Any indications in the sand, any tracks?" Dr. Kenward asked.

"I didn't look for that."

"Are the burros gone?"

"No. They're there."

Dr. Kenward pushed the end of his cigarette down hard in the ash tray. "Let's go look the place over. You have a flashlight?"

"Yes."

"Look in on the patients," he said. "Tell them you may be out for five or ten minutes. Where's that housekeeper, by the way?"

"I don't know. It seems as though people cleared out of the house by magic. Mrs. Sims simply isn't here. Her daughter went out with Hayward. I understand she left a note saying they were going to Las Vegas to be married. Mrs. Sims was pretty much upset over it. She left the dishes in the sink and dashed out."

"Upset? Why?"

"She doesn't like him."

"Where are the others?"

"I don't know. It seems they'd been having a stockholders'

meeting. Moffgat, the lawyer, was here. He tried some of his clever tricks and they didn't pan out, thanks to Mr. Mason. Then everyone went out. I'm a little surprised that Mrs. Bradisson and her son went, because they should still be feeling weak from the effects of the poison. At least, one would think so. They were terribly sick last night."

Dr. Kenward said, "They seem to have made a very satisfactory recovery. However, that doesn't need to concern us. We have got to notify the police again. But before they take over, I want to see what has happened to Banning Clarke. I want to make sure that he isn't on the grounds, or anywhere around the house. If he needs medical attention, I want to see that he gets it before the officers start another inquisition."

Velma Starler looked in on her patients, advised Dr. Kenward, "They're resting quietly. Shall we go now?"

He nodded.

They walked out through the back door, around the flagstone walk, down stone steps, and then followed the beam of the flashlight through the terraced slope which had been so skillfully landscaped. To their left was the rock wall, ahead of them and to their right was the cactus garden. A moon, but slightly past the full, hung in limpid brilliance in the eastern heavens, sending shafts of silvery light, creating splotches of inky shadows.

"Just like being out in the middle of the Mojave Desert," Dr. Kenward said. "It gives me a creepy feeling every time I come out here. Not creepy, exactly either; it's as though you had suddenly walked out of the present into the past."

"I know exactly how you feel," she said. "It's such a complete change. — Over here is where they had their camp. There's the fireplace, you see, and here's where their sleeping bags were."

"Let's see the flashlight for a moment," Dr. Kenward said. "Ah, I thought so."

"What?"

"That peculiar oblong section of sand. Notice how those marks lead up to that little smooth section — slightly concave as though a cylinder had been pressed down."

"Why, yes. I hadn't noticed it before. What causes it?"

"That is where Banning Clarke's sleeping bag was spread out. That sleeping bag has been neatly rolled up. You can see where someone started rolling and pushing, moving forward on his knees, rolling the sleeping bag into a tight roll. See those peculiar marks? They're made by knees pressing into the sand as the sleeping bag was rolled as tightly as possible. Then, when the bag had been rolled into a compact bundle, it was picked up for roping'. The last pressure on the

bag shoved it down into the sand and left that little rectangular, slightly concave space.”

“I see — but is that particularly important?”

“I think so.”

“I’m afraid I don’t see just what you’re driving at.”

“A camper,” Dr. Kenward said, “no matter how great the rush, would roll up a sleeping bag and carry it rolled — unless he were going to put it on a horse, in which event he might fold it double. A tenderfoot, however, hurriedly trying to remove a sleeping bag as evidence, would rush in and pick it up any old way and dash out with it.”

“So you think this sleeping bag was rolled by someone who had done a great deal of camping?”

He nodded.

“Banning Clarke?”

“Either Clarke or Salty Bowers.”

“And what does that mean?”

“One of the possibilities is that Salty Bowers and Banning Clarke are playing some deep game. I’m afraid that out on the road somewhere, at a point affording no immediate medical attention, Clarke will develop symptoms of arsenic poisoning, and the retching and nausea will overtax his heart even if the poison is not fatal.”

Silently they moved toward the house, soaking up the night tranquility. Velma had switched off the flashlight. The light of the moon was sufficient to guide them through the weird cacti, the stone wall casting a sinister shadow, the ocean far below — a misty sheet of mystery from which could be heard the low pulsing of booming surf.

Abruptly Dr. Kenward stopped, his back against the wall. “Let’s take ten minutes,” he said. “Surely we’re entitled to that much. Our patients are coming along all right, and if the police aren’t notified for ten minutes, no great harm will be done.”

“You’re tired, aren’t you?”

“I’ve been going pretty steadily,” he admitted. “It seems so calm out here, so utterly peaceful. You’re away from the jangle of the telephone, the neurotics, the hypochondriacs. — Sometimes, since I’ve met Salty Bowers, I’ve wondered about life in the desert, being out with a burro somewhere in the big open spaces, rolling out a sleeping bag, stretching out to slumber with the vast silence reaching down from interstellar spaces to wrap you in a blanket of oblivion. It must be a wonderful sensation.”

“Look, Bruce,” she said abruptly, almost unconsciously using his first name, “you can’t keep this up day in and day out, month in and month out, year in and year out. Why don’t you prescribe for yourself the same treatment you would prescribe for a patient? Take a month

off and get away from everything, simply drop the whole business.”

“I can’t.”

“The argument you would use for the patient is that if you had a nervous breakdown, or if you fell over dead, things would go on without you.”

The moonlight softened the harshness of the smile that twisted his lips. “Quite true,” he admitted. “That, however, is something I could not control. But if I left now, it would mean that my practice would simply fall on other shoulders that were already overburdened with troubles of their own. The only thing to do is to keep plugging. There are only a few of us, relatively, to carry on. But we *are* entitled to a ten-minute recess once in a while.”

Abruptly he took her arm, walked back down to the place where Banning Clarke and Salty Bowers had had their camp. He seated himself and drew her down beside him in the sand.

“Now then,” he observed, “we are a couple of prospectors sitting out in the desert. There’s nothing we can do till daylight; we’re absorbing the regenerating peace and tranquillity which comes only to those who live close to Nature, in the open air.”

Velma Starler, a catch in her throat, pointed her finger out toward the vague blue of the moonlit mountains. “Tomorrow,” she said, trying to mimic the slow drawl of Salty Bowers, “we’ll head up through that pass and prospect around the outcropping. Meantime, guess there ain’t anything to do except drop off to sleep.”

“That’s the spirit,” Bruce Kenward applauded. He clasped his hands behind his head, lay back on the sand, his face turned toward the sky. “Strange how many stars there are, even when the moon’s almost full. I guess we don’t really see the heavens in the city. Salty Bowers was trying to tell me about how you could lie on your back in the desert and look up at the heavens blazing with myriads of brilliant stars whose existence you never even suspected until you got out away from the cities into the clear dry air of the desert.”

“They’re exceptionally clear tonight,” she said, “even with the moon. There are dozens of stars visible.”

“Dozens,” he said musingly. “I wonder how many stars are visible in the desert — on a moonlit night. I wonder if we couldn’t play hookey some evening and drive out into the desert just to see. — I wonder just how many there are visible now. Let’s see, there are five... ten... fifteen... twenty... twenty-five... thirty... thirty-one... thirty-two... thirty-three... I wonder if I counted that one...”

She didn’t say anything when he lapsed into silence. A few seconds later she heard the even, regular breathing of an exhausted man dropping off into the contentment of much-needed slumber.

Noiselessly, she raised herself to her feet, moved as silently as she

could through the soft sand until she was half a dozen steps away, then she turned to look back at him, a wistful tenderness in her eyes as she saw the moonlight caressing the careworn features relaxed in sleep.

For a moment she stood looking down at him, then she turned and walked quietly toward the big house which had always been so distasteful to its owner. She invaded a guest room, folded a couple of heavy blankets over her arm, returned to the cactus garden, tiptoed up to the sleeping physician and very gently placed the blankets over him, using the deft skill of a trained nurse so that no pressure would rouse him.

Then she hurried back to the house, looked in on Perry Mason, then on Della Street. Then, going into the library, she dialed Operator and said, "Police Headquarters, please. I wish to report an attempted homicide."

Chapter 9

Lieutenant Tragg of the Metropolitan Police Force seated himself on the edge of Perry Mason's bed. The motion of the bedsprings, due to his weight, caused Mason to open his eyes.

"Hello," Mason said. "What the devil are you doing here?"

Tragg grinned at him. "Believe it or not, I'm on my vacation."

"It's optional with me?" Mason asked, his voice showing weakness.

"What is?"

"Whether I believe it or not."

Tragg laughed outright. "It happens to be the truth, Mason. My brother-in-law's the sheriff here. I've been on a fishing trip, dropped in on my way back to leave a few trout with my sister — and the telephone call came in about the poisoning. Sam Gregory, my brother-in-law, wanted me to take a hand. I told him nothing doing. I have enough of that sort of stuff in my own bailiwick without trying to borrow trouble. Then he explained to me that his latest victims were from my home town. Perry Mason and Miss Della Street, his secretary. You can imagine my reaction. I couldn't miss a set-up like that."

Mason's eyelids fluttered. He tried a grin, but it was only a grimace. "I'm a little groggy. I think they've given me a hypodermic. Tell me the truth, now, Tragg, are you real, or are you just part of the drug-induced nightmare?"

"I'm part of the nightmare."

"That's what I thought. It's a big relief."

"How does it seem to be the victim, for once?"

"Terrible."

"Well, you've had it coming to you for a long while. You've been sticking up for criminals and now you can see the other side of the picture."

Mason roused himself. "Not 'sticking up for criminals'," he protested indignantly. "I have never stuck up for any criminal. I have merely asked for the orderly administration of an impartial justice."

"Taking advantage of all the technicalities, of course," Tragg said.

Mason's voice was blurred as that of a man who talks in his sleep, but there was no fumbling over words. "Why not? The law is technical. Any man-made rule is technical. You make a line of demarcation between what is prescribed and what is prohibited, and you will always have borderline cases that seem so close to each other as to be absurd. And furthermore, Lieutenant — furthermore.... I'll thank you to remember that my clients are not criminals until they've

been convicted by juries — and so far, that hasn't happened... Guess I just had that hypo... I'm shaking it off."

Tragg said curiously, "I suppose you will be telling me next that the person who slipped that poison into your sugar is entitled to the benefit of all the safeguards of the law."

"Why not?"

"Don't you feel any resentment?"

"I couldn't feel enough resentment against anyone to ask that due legal process be disregarded. Due legal process is my own safeguard against being convicted unjustly. To my mind, that's government. It's law and order. Damn it, Tragg, can you understand what I'm saying?"

"Sure."

"My mind is clear," Mason said, "but my tongue seems a foot thick. You've cleared the fuzz out of my brain, but the words seem to get garbled as my tongue wrestles with them. However, I'm getting better and stronger every minute. How's Della?"

"Doing fine."

"What time is it?"

"Around midnight."

"Where's Banning Clarke? How is he?"

"No one knows. He isn't here. Now let's finish this question of ethics. Would you be able to pocket your individual resentment enough to defend whoever my brother-in-law arrests for putting poison in the sugar?"

"Why not?"

"Even if you thought that person guilty?"

Mason said, somewhat wearily, "The law guarantees a person a trial by *jury*, Tragg. If I should refuse to defend someone because I thought him guilty, that would be a trial by Perry Mason, not a trial by jury. Of course, the accused wouldn't want me to represent him. Why do you say the poison was in the sugar? Is that just a guess?"

"No. We've found white arsenic in the sugar bowl."

"All through the sugar?"

"No. Apparently some had been scattered on the top of the sugar bowl. Looks as if the poisoner hadn't had time to mix it in with the contents of the bowl, but had just dumped it on top."

Mason struggled up to a sitting position in the bed. His eyes were clear now, his words crisp. "Look here, Tragg, that can't be right."

"What can't be?"

"The sugar."

"What about it?"

"It happens that Della Street and I both take sugar in our tea. So does Banning Clarke. Now Clarke had already eaten his dinner. He said he'd have a cup of tea with us and the housekeeper served him

his tea first. He took two big teaspoonfuls from the top of the sugar bowl, then Della and I both had sugar when our tea was served. After that, Nell Sims helped herself to a cup of tea and I distinctly remember she put two full spoonfuls of sugar in it. Then, as I remember it, there were several more cups all around. At least Della, Banning Clarke and I had a couple of refills. If arsenic had been put in the *top* of the sugar bowl and hadn't been mixed with the sugar lower down, I doubt if you could have recovered very much from what sugar was left in the sugar bowl."

"Well, we did. We—" Tragg broke off suddenly. He looked up, grinned, said, "Come on in, Sam. I want you to meet my own particular thorn in the flesh. Sam, this is Perry Mason, the noted lawyer, the man who has upset my apple cart several times."

Sam Gregory, a powerful, thick-set man with a good-natured grin and steel-hard eyes, crossed the room to shake hands with Perry Mason. "I've always wanted to meet you," he admitted.

"Now don't tell him that you've followed his cases with such great interest," Tragg said. "That sort of talk spoils him."

"Not at all," Gregory said. "My interest has been purely one of family connection. I've always wanted to see the man who could get the Lieutenant's goat and keep it the way you've done."

"Ouch," Tragg said. "I should have known better than to lead with my chin on that one."

"What," Mason asked, "does the housekeeper say, and is she poisoned?"

"The housekeeper, so far, has said nothing," Tragg said, "and we don't know whether she's poisoned for the simple reason that we haven't been able to find her. Apparently her daughter's out getting married, and it's my hunch Mamma is on the long-distance telephone somewhere trying to stop it. Mrs. Bradisson and her son James evidently went out with an attorney by the name of Moffgat. They're having a conference somewhere. Apparently they're afraid you might have a dictograph concealed in the walls here."

"How long have you been here?" Mason asked.

"A little over an hour. Lucky thing that nurse was here and had an antidote for arsenic poisoning where she could put her hand on it. She knocked the poison out of your system almost as soon as the symptoms showed up. She's a wonder. Only thing we have against her is that she didn't notify us at once. Seems that she gave you the proper treatment, telephoned the doctor, and didn't report the case at that time because she wanted the doctor's diagnosis. Can't blame her for that. After she got that diagnosis, she was too busy with treatment for a while — or so she says. My own idea is that she's got the doctor hidden out somewhere where we can't question *him* until morning.

We've been unable to raise him on the telephone. He reports to a central agency when he goes out on calls, and they insist he's on a call here."

Tragg grinned at Mason. "Women certainly are loyal. I don't blame her too much if she did stall things along until the doctor could get away. But it makes Sam mad. I guess the doctor is all in, and Sam would have been throwing questions at him for an hour. Women in jobs certainly do give their bosses a loyalty. Take Della Street, for instance. She's made being your secretary her life's work. Lord knows all the things she has had to put up with, too. I imagine that with your nervous temperament you're not the easiest man in the world to get along with. I used to think it was a loyalty to you personally that kept her at it, but now I guess it's a loyalty to the job and what it stands for."

Mason nodded. "It's something that's bigger and finer than you realize at first. They dedicate themselves to a job and — Say, wait a minute! If we pulled through because of getting such prompt treatment, what will happen to Banning Clarke and the housekeeper, with the amount of sugar *they* consumed?"

Sheriff Gregory said, "That's what is bothering us. We're making every effort to find them. Apparently Clarke and Bowers started out in that old rattle-trap car they drive, and we've broadcast a description of it. It should be picked up any minute now."

A man thrust his head in the door, said, "Sheriff, can I speak to you a moment, please?"

"What is it?" the sheriff asked.

"Mrs. Sims has returned."

"Has she been ill?"

"Apparently not. I didn't tell her anything about the poisoning. She's gone up to her room to get ready for bed."

"Go get her and bring her in," Gregory said, arranging the light so she would be unable to see Mason's features. "I want to ask her a couple of questions."

When the last man had left, Tragg said to Gregory, "Wise me up to her. What sort is she? You've been questioning her on that Bradisson poisoning."

Gregory laughed. "She's a rugged individual, all right. As I get the story, Banning Clarke sent for her in January of 'forty-two right after his wife died. She was running a restaurant in Mojave, but he made it worth her while to come down here and take over the house. He evidently hated this house — probably had reason for doing so, too. His wife went in for entertainment and bridge parties, late hours, heavy meals and somewhat steady drinking. Those prospectors go on terrific sprees, but in between times they're out in the desert living

and sleeping in the open air. There's a lot of difference between that and—"

The door opened. Mrs. Sims said tonelessly, "Did you want me? Land sakes, can't a person even get to sleep without being called in for more questions? I thought you'd combed the place from cellar to attic and—"

"This," the sheriff interrupted, "is a new development. You served a late dinner in your kitchen tonight, didn't you?"

"Well, if that has anything to do with you, yes I did. I told Mr. Clarke the kitchen was no place to serve dinner to a famous lawyer, but he didn't want the others to know he was here, and said it had to be in the kitchen. Goodness knows it's a big enough kitchen, with a table—"

"And you served tea with the meal?"

"I did. You just can't dish out coffee any more whenever—"

"And you yourself drank some tea?"

"I did. And if it's bothering you, I'll—"

"And you take sugar in your tea, don't you?"

"I most certainly do — and as far as that goes—"

"You got your sugar out of the sugar bowl that was on the table, didn't you?"

"Yes. I've almost quit scooping it up off the floor. It took a lot of will power to break myself of the habit, but—"

"And you felt no ill effects?"

"From the tea, or the sugar, or your questions?"

"Never mind the sarcasm. Just answer my question, please. You felt no ill effects?"

"Certainly not."

"Others did."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Perry Mason and his secretary were both poisoned."

Mrs. Sims said, "I suppose this is some sort of third-degree?"

"We're simply questioning you, that's all."

"Then why tell me all this pack of lies? Why not ask what you want?"

"We're telling you the truth. Mason and his secretary were poisoned."

She seemed bewildered as incredulity gave way to belief. "Why... why— Did they die?"

"No. Thanks to the fact that the nurse was on the job with proper treatment and antidotes, they're coming along very nicely. The point is, however, that we found large quantities of white arsenic mixed in with the sugar in the sugar bowl."

"Why, goodness sake! I had sugar out of that sugar bowl tonight

myself!"

"And you felt no disagreeable after-effects?"

"Certainly not."

"You're certain the sugar came out of that same sugar bowl — the white one with the round knob on the top?"

"Certainly. There was only one sugar bowl on the table. That's the sugar bowl I keep for the kitchen."

"Where do you keep it?"

"In the pantry on the lower shelf."

"And I suppose anyone in the house would have access to it?"

"Naturally. Look here, Mr. Clarke had sugar out of that bowl.

How is *he*?"

"We don't know. We can't find him."

"You mean he's gone?"

"Yes."

Sheriff Gregory said, "I think you must realize, Mrs. Sims, that since this is the second time food that you have served has been poisoned, you are placed in a rather peculiar position."

"I don't understand what you're getting at."

"You'll have to give a most detailed account of everything you've done."

"What do you want to know?"

"You've been out?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"That's my business."

"We want to know. I told you you'd have to give an account."

"I don't see how that concerns you in any way."

"It may be important."

"Well, if it's any of your business, my daughter ran away with that mining promoter, Hayward Small. They're going to Las Vegas to be married. Well, Jerry Coslet is in an Army camp near Kingman, Arizona. He'd given Dorina the name of a man who runs a sort of poolroom in Kingman. He said that this man could always get word to him in case she ever wanted to call him. Some boys from the camp would always be there. Well, I called that poolroom, and it happened Jerry was there himself. I told him what was happening. I told him Dorina was a good girl, but that slick mining salesman was handing her a line, and he hadn't been having enough competition."

"What did Jerry say?"

"He didn't say anything much."

"Did you ask him to do anything about it?"

"No. I just told him. If he's the kind of man he should be, he'll do something about it all right."

"And you've been telephoning all this time?"

"I'll say I have. Try to put in a telephone call and they stall you along for an hour and then tell you the circuits are busy for two hours. This war certainly has increased the production of talk."

Tragg grinned. "Talk is cheap."

"Not to Kingman, Arizona, it isn't. Not when you're a working woman."

"How," Tragg asked, "do you account for the fact that you took sugar from that bowl, and felt no ill effects, when two other people who took sugar from the same bowl developed prompt symptoms of arsenic poisoning?"

"I don't 'account' for it," Nell Sims snapped. "It's up to you to 'account' for it. That's your business."

"You don't think your daughter is in love with Hayward Small?"

"He's glib. He's just naturally slick and he's been going around with her, keeping her out late — later and later. I don't like it. He's too old for her. And he's always giving you that steady eye — pretending he's working his psychology on you. A girl Dorina's age don't want psychology. She wants romance. He isn't the type, and he's been married. He told me that himself. You know as well as I do it isn't right for a married man to go traipsing around with a girl Dorina's age, even if he has been divorced. It ain't right."

"You think — that is — you think there's been anything wrong in the relationship, Mrs. Sims?"

Mrs. Sims glared at both of them. "Let him," she proclaimed, "who is without stones among you cast the first sin. My daughter is a good girl."

"I know. I understand. But I'm merely trying to find out exactly what you meant when—"

"I meant what I said. There ain't no good going to come of a thing like that. And now I've told you all I know, and I'm going to bed."

She turned and stalked out of the room.

Tragg turned out the light, which had been shining so brightly in her eyes that she couldn't see Mason on the bed. "How you feeling. Mason? Has the hypo sneaked up on you again?"

There was no answer. Mason was breathing regularly, eyes closed.

"Drugged," Tragg said, "and I guess he's pretty weak. The nurse says he's okay. Wish she'd kept Dr. Kenward here so we could have questioned him. Well, Sam, figure that one out. Either she's lying, or she took sugar from a bowl that had a lot of arsenic in it and felt no ill effects."

"She might be lying about the sugar."

"No. Perry Mason says she had sugar in her tea."

“That’s right... I’m playing with a thought that worries me.”

“What?”

“Suppose that instead of taking sugar out of that bowl she was putting arsenic in. It would be easy to dip in with a spoon and then, after lifting it out, while replacing the cover, drop in the poison.”

Tragg said, “I’ve had the same idea. The last person to take sugar out of that bowl without being poisoned is the most logical suspect. Let’s have a smoke, Sam. We aren’t getting anywhere right now. Our next step is to check all the possible suspects, and then see if we can’t find arsenic in the possession of one of them — or find where someone has been buying arsenic.”

They scraped matches into flame, smoked for a while in silence. Sam Gregory stretched out his big arms, yawned. “Well, I’m going to bed. I—”

A staccato explosion coming from the direction of the gardens spat against their eardrums, caused the sheriff to bite down abruptly on an unfinished sentence, turn his head, listening. Two more explosions made the silence which followed seem sinister.

Somewhere on the floor above them feet thudded to the floor, then raced to the stairs, came rushing down them.

The side door that opened out to the garden was jerked open so hard that it banged against the wall.

Sam Gregory tugged a big revolver from a holster that had worn shiny with much usage. “I guess,” he observed grimly, “this is it... From the southeast corner of the grounds?”

“I think so,” Tragg said. “Let’s go.”

They ran out of the room. The sheriff, in the lead, called out, “In case we—”

He was interrupted by the sound of Velma Starler screaming.

Two more shots sounded from the cactus garden.

Chapter 10

Sam Gregory and Lieutenant Tragg, racing ahead, had some trouble orienting themselves in the moonlit grounds. There was no longer any sound of screams to guide them. A spurious peace had descended upon the shadow-splotched grounds. Everything seemed calm and peaceful as the two officers, weapons in hand, moved cautiously forward.

Abruptly, Tragg clasped the sheriff's shoulder. "Voices," he whispered, and then added, "Steps — over here."

They listened. The sheriff, stocky and carrying a little too much weight, was breathing heavily, making it difficult to listen — but after a moment they could hear the crunch of sand as steps came toward them.

The sounds were coming from the other side of a large, circular patch of spineless cactus. Tragg took one side, the sheriff the other, circling swiftly.

Velma Starler was walking slowly toward them. Dr. Kenward was leaning heavily on her shoulder. The nurse's face showed white and apprehensive in the moonlight as she saw the two men converging on her. Then she recognized the officers, said, "Dr. Kenward has been shot."

The doctor's professional fingers were exploring the injury even as he walked. He said, calmly, "A perforation of the adductor magnus, possibly a perforation of the muscular branch of the profunda artery. Rather more extensive hemorrhage than would otherwise be expected. I think we'll be able to control it all right. We'll go on to the house if you don't mind, gentlemen."

He resumed his hobbling.

"How did you happen to get shot?" Gregory asked. "Who did the shooting? Did you fire any shots? What were you doing out there?"

Velma Starler said almost angrily. "He fell asleep when we were out here, and I let him stay there, hoping he'd get a little much-needed rest. Night calls have been wrecking his health. He doesn't have the faintest idea who fired the shots."

Lieutenant Tragg picked up Dr. Kenward's left arm, flung it over his neck and shoulder so as to give the doctor more support.

Dr. Kenward said in his even, unemotional voice, "I was asleep, gentlemen. I am not certain, but I believe it was a shot that roused me yet I cannot definitely identify the thing that awakened me as being a shot. However, I do know there were at least two shots fired during the interval that it took me to regain my senses as I awakened from deep slumber. I had some difficulty remembering where I was — and

then I realized that projectiles were thudding into the sand and that they were intended for me.

"I jumped to my feet and started to run.

"Apparently the person who was doing the shooting must have been partially concealed. As I ran, I evidently placed a clump of cactus between us. My assailant thereupon detoured around this cactus, stalked me in the moonlight, saw me again in time to fire more shots. It was the second of these shots that took effect."

"I saw him fall," Velma Starler explained, "at the last shot. I knew, as soon as I saw him running toward me, that someone had been shooting at him."

"You never saw your assailant?" Gregory asked.

"No."

"Saw no flashes of gunfire?"

"No."

"I did," Velma Starler said. "I saw the flashes from the last two shots. They were over behind that big barrel cactus. That's about fifty or sixty feet from where Dr. Kenward had been lying."

"You can make it from here on all right, Doctor?" Lieutenant Tragg asked.

"With Velma's help, yes. I'm somewhat alarmed about the apparent extent of the hemorrhage, but we can quite possibly control that. Let us hope so. I should dislike to disturb another physician."

Tragg released the doctor's arm, nodded to Gregory.

The two men turned back toward the cactus gardens, separated slightly, revolvers drawn.

"Take it easy," Tragg said to his brother-in-law. "He's apt to shoot from ambush."

Sheriff Gregory detoured still farther to the right. "Shoot first," he said. "Ask questions afterwards. Don't take any chances."

They were walking slowly now, clinging to the shadows, darting swiftly across the moonlit strips of sand, working together like well-trained bird dogs moving through cover, keeping just about the same distance apart, spaced in such a way that any person concealing himself from one could not avoid the other's angle of vision.

And at the end of their stalk they came to the gleaming whiteness of the stuccoed wall that surrounded the grounds. They had seen and heard nothing. The garden had been tranquil in the moonlight, filled with deep silence, punctuated at rhythmic intervals by the undertone of booming surf softened by distance to a vague rumble. Only the sinister red trail left by the wounded man bore witness to the deadly menace of the moonlit silence.

"Let's go back," Tragg said, "to where the man was lying and see if we can find the place from which the shots were fired. Then we'll

look for tracks.”

They located the rock fireplace covered with a sheet of iron which had served the prospectors as an outdoor stove and to which the smell of stale wood smoke still clung. They found the crumpled blankets at the place where Dr. Kenward had stretched out and gone to sleep, and the furrowed indentations which marked where at least two of the bullets had plowed into the sand. Converging on the huge barrel cactus some thirty yards away, the two men caught the glitter of an empty brass cartridge case as it reflected back the moonlight.

Lieutenant Tragg picked it up. “Thirty-eight caliber automatic,” he said, briefly.

There were tracks here behind the cactus. Sam Gregory, wise in the ways of the cattle country, lowered his flashlight and held it close to the ground so that the tracks would be made more distinct by an oblique illumination. By patience, he read the story of what had happened, although it took him some twenty minutes to satisfy himself.

Someone had stalked the sleeping doctor as a hunter would have stalked a deer, starting first at a point behind the wall, then emerging into the moonlight, crawling along on hands and knees through the sand, then at length lying down flat and hitching along an inch or two at a time. Then three shots had been fired. The person who fired those shots had then jumped up, leaving deep footprints in the soft sand, had rushed around to another cactus fifty yards away, and had fired two more shots. Then the tracks showed a headlong sprint toward the white stucco wall. - That much the sand told plainly and distinctly, but for the rest the record was blurred. The sand was so soft and dried that it had flowed back into the tracks, leaving it impossible to tell much about them save that the tracks seemed rather small.

Lieutenant Tragg moved off to one side, took half a dozen running steps in order to compare the indentations made in the sand by his own feet with those that had been left by their quarry.

“Small feet,” he said.

Gregory wasn’t so certain. “Ever notice the tracks made by high-heeled cowboy boots?” he asked.

“Can’t say that I have,” Tragg admitted.

“I have. It’s just a guess that these tracks might have been made by high-heeled cowboy riding boots.”

“Or by a woman?” Tragg asked.

Gregory gave that suggestion thoughtful consideration. “*Perhaps* by a woman,” he admitted, somewhat reluctantly. “Let’s go back to the house.”

The telephone was ringing by the time they reached the house, but no one paid the slightest attention to it. Velma Starler was

working on Dr. Kenward's leg. And the physician, sitting back with an air of professional detachment, was giving her directions.

Sheriff Gregory went to the telephone, picked up the receiver, said "Yes, what is it?"

"This the sheriff?"

"Yes."

"Headquarters in San Roberto. A radio prowl car has just reported in over two-way radio to get in touch with you and tell you that a case of arsenic poisoning that occurred up in the Skyline district is being rushed to the Haven of Mercy Hospital."

"Can you give me any details?" Gregory asked.

"An old battered pickup loaded with camp stuff carrying a house trailer on behind went through a boulevard stop. The prowl car pulled alongside. Man at the wheel says his name is Bowers and his partner in the trailer is dying with arsenic poisoning. He had driven to the residence of Dr. Kenward, but the doctor wasn't home and he was rushing to a hospital. The prowl car is clearing the way with the siren. Bowers said it tied in with another poisoning case, and to notify you. There are two men in that prowl car. One of them made the report while the other was driving. I can reach them within a couple of seconds. Do you want me to contact the car and deliver any message?"

"Yes," Sheriff Gregory said. "Tell them that I'll meet them at the Haven of Mercy Hospital."

He slammed up the telephone, turned to Tragg. "Banning Clarke," he said, "in a house trailer. Car driven by Salty Bowers. Clarke's dying with arsenic poisoning. Rushing to the Haven of Mercy Hospital. Want to go? We'll leave the deputy here."

Tragg started for the door. "Let us go."

They raced down the reception hallway, their feet pounding loudly on the waxed tiles awakening echoes from the somber walls of the silent house. They dashed through the front door and into the sheriff's automobile. Gregory slammed the car into gear, shot out of the graveled driveway, skidded into the winding concrete boulevard and turned on the siren.

"After all," Tragg protested, bracing himself between the back of the front seat and the instrument board of the car, "there *are* four wheels on this automobile, Sammy, my lad. You might as well use all of them at once instead of just two at a time."

The sheriff grinned, whipped the car around another curve, still gathering speed. "When I'm down in the city, you scare the pants off of me driving like hell through traffic, so I'm glad our open roads make you nervous. It's just a question of what you become accustomed to. We have curves. You have traffic."

"But after all, a half a minute isn't going to make too much

difference in the case," Tragg pointed out.

"The report is that Banning Clarke's dying. I want to get a dying statement from him."

"He won't know who poisoned him."

"You might be surprised." There was no further discussion. The sheriff whipped and skidded around turns, hit the straightaway at the foot of the grade, and, with siren screaming, tore through the slumbering residential outskirts of San Roberto, slammed on the brakes and skidded into the ambulance entrance of the huge hospital which was located well outside of the congested district.

The sheriff's blood-red spotlight threw the back of a house trailer into wine-colored brilliance. A little group of men was standing around the door of this trailer, and as the sheriff slid his car to a stop and jerked the door open, a nurse, accompanying a doctor who was wearing a white coat and carrying a stethoscope in his hand, emerged from the house trailer.

The sheriff pushed forward. "What are his chances, Doctor?"

The man in the white coat said quietly, "He hasn't any."

"You mean he's—"

"Dead."

Sam Gregory let out his breath in a weary sigh. "Arsenic poisoning?" he asked in the voice of one propounding a routine question merely for the purpose of establishing a foregone conclusion.

"Apparently," the doctor said dryly, "it was a thirty-eight-caliber bullet fired almost directly into the heart at short range. There are evidences that at some time before the shooting the man had ingested a considerable quantity of arsenic, and, in view of the cardiac history given me by his friend, Mr. Bowers, there is every reason to assume that the symptoms had progressed too far for remedial treatment to have been of the slightest benefit. The bullet, therefore, merely hastened the end by a matter of minutes."

Tragg turned to the sheriff. "And with Perry Mason in the case, is *that* a sweet legal situation! When you see your District Attorney, give him my sympathy."

Chapter 11

Perry Mason awakened from a sleep of utter exhaustion. His head was clear now. A dim light at the far corner of the room furnished enough illumination to enable him to see the face of his watch. It was three-fifteen.

Mason sat up for a few moments on the edge of the bed, then put on his clothes. His stomach and abdomen felt as sore as though someone had been beating him with a club. He was weak and groggy, but the metallic burning sensation had left his mouth and throat. He felt mentally alert.

There was in the back of his mind a vague recollection that finally crystallized into clarity. Sometime during the night, Velma Starler had wakened him taking his pulse, had told him to go to sleep, informed him Banning Clarke was dead, that Dr. Kenward was resting easily, and that Della Street had been sleeping peacefully since shortly after eleven. At the time, Mason had been too exhausted to care about anything except that Della was out of danger. The rest of what Velma Starler had said had been merely words which had meaning but no significance.

Now, Mason was mentally alert once more. He felt rested, although weak as a wet kitten. His mind was already beginning to correlate various facts in to a composite whole.

He started out to search for Velma Starler.

The big house seemed ominously dormant. It retained an atmosphere of having been lived in, yet somehow conveyed the impression of having, for the moment, lost its tenants. The long, dimly lit hallway seemed a sepulchral passage rather than part of a residence. The huge room into which Perry Mason glanced might have been a section of a museum, after the doors had been closed and spectators turned away.

Mason wished to avoid disturbing anyone who was sleeping. He hoped he'd find Velma Starler cat-napping in some room with the door open. He didn't know where Della Street was located. Velma could tell him. He had been put to bed in a downstairs room, probably one designed for occupancy by a maid. He knew generally that Della Street was somewhere on the second floor, but didn't know where.

A reading lamp in the library cast a shielded circle of illumination which served to emphasize the deep shadows in the far corners of the big room. Almost directly under the reading lamp was a smoking stand on which reposed a telephone, a long extension cord running back to a plug in the wall. A huge chair was drawn up near by.

Mason was tiptoeing past when, seized with an idea, he turned

back, dropped into the depths of the soft cushioned chair, picked up the receiver, dialed long distance, and said, "I want to talk with Paul Drake, of the Drake Detective Agency in Los Angeles. Reverse the charges. Don't call on the regular number. Use this unlisted number, Rexmount 6985. I'll wait on the line."

Mason realized once more how weak he was as his head welcomed the support of the cushions at the back of the chair while he waited for the call to be put through.

At length he heard Paul Drake's voice, thick with sleep, saying, "Hello-hello. Yes." The connection abruptly clicked off while the operator asked his okay on the long-distance call. Then a moment later Drake was back on the line. "Hello, Perry. What the hell's wrong with you? Haven't you got money enough to pay for a telephone call?"

Mason kept his voice low. "I'm calling from Banning Clarke's residence in San Roberto, Paul. I want you to get started on a job right away."

"You always *do* want something in the middle of the night," Drake said irritably. "What is it this time?"

"I want you to become a prospector, Paul."

"A what!" Drake exclaimed incredulously.

"A prospector. A seedy old miner."

"You're kidding."

"No. I mean it."

"What's the idea?"

"Now listen," Mason said, keeping his lips close to the mouthpiece of the telephone and his voice low. "Get these instructions straight. I won't have a chance to repeat them. Harvey Brady, who has the big cattle ranch down below Las Alisas, is a client of mine and a pretty good egg to boot. He'll give you a hand in putting this across."

"I know where the ranch is," Drake said. "What do I do?"

"Do you know some newspaper reporter who would give you a good break if he got a nice human-interest story out of it?"

Drake said, "I know reporters who would cut their grandmothers' throats to get a good human-interest story."

"Even if the story weren't true?"

"They like their stuff true, Perry."

"All right. Make it true for them then."

"Go ahead. What's the gag?"

"You're a prospector," Mason said. "You were a little down on your luck. Harvey Brady picked you up in the desert. You struck him for a grubstake. He'd been interested in some of the famous lost mines of California. He told you he'd grubstake you to find one of those lost mines if you'd set about locating it his way. He had a theory about

how it could be found.”

“Which lost mine?” Drake asked.

“You’ll be mysterious about that and keep it very much under your hat, but you’ll let the information slip some way that it’s really the famous Lost Goler Diggings. You’ll be mysterious and secretive about the whole business. Harvey Brady will be jubilant. — Now listen, Paul, you’ve got to get hold of some gold — quite a bunch of gold, so you can make it sound convincing. Think you could do that?”

“I can do it,” Drake grumbled, “but I can’t do it at three o’clock in the morning. Have a heart, Perry.”

Mason said, “This story has got to break before noon. You’ll have to pick yourself up a couple of burros, a gold pan, a pick and shovel, a sweat-stained sombrero, some old patched overalls, and all the rest of it.”

“Okay. I’ll work it out some way. Then what do I do?”

“Then,” Mason said, “you proceed to make whoopee.”

“On an expense account?”

“On an expense account.”

Drake’s voice showed more enthusiasm. “This may not be so bad. You are a hard taskmaster, Perry, but you do have your good points.”

“When you get properly jingled,” Mason said, “you let it slip that the mine you’ve found is on patented property, and for that reason you’ll have to keep it a secret until your backer, Harvey Brady, can buy up the property. And then Harvey Brady claims you’re talking too much and grabs you and whisks you into oblivion.”

“How much of an oblivion?”

“I’ll engineer that,” Mason said. “I’ll be on the job by that time. But the main thing is to get started on this thing right away.”

Drake said, “All right. I’ll see what I can do. You *do* ask the damndest things, Perry.”

“What’s wrong with this?” Mason asked with well-simulated surprise.

“Oh nothing,” Drake said. “Only some time, when you get a little bored with life, try rolling out of bed at three-thirty in the morning with an assignment to have a couple of burros and a prospecting outfit picked up by daylight, then in addition, to get several hundred dollars in placer gold. Then throw in a sweat-stained sombrero that looks convincing, some worn overalls and... Oh, it’s all right, Perry. I guess I’m just getting a little crabby. It sounded bad when you were talking about it, but now that I list over the things I have to do it sounds easy. You’re sure there isn’t anything else you want?”

“Never mind the sarcasm,” Mason said, and hung up before Drake could think of something else to say.

For a few moments Mason rested in the chair, getting his thoughts

in order. Then as he checked back over his conversation with Paul Drake, he suddenly frowned with annoyance, picked up the telephone again and said to the long distance operator, "I was just talking with Paul Drake in Los Angeles at Rexmount 6985. There was something that I forgot to tell him. Can you get him back on the line right away? It's *very* important."

Mason held the line. Within a matter of seconds, he heard Drake's voice again. "Hello, Perry. Something else you forgot to tell me, I suppose."

"Yes," Mason said.

"What is it — do you want me to be riding a white elephant when I have my picture taken, or something like that?"

"After you've completed your build-up," Mason said, "be very careful what you eat and drink."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that someone will try to slip you a big dose of arsenic. And it's not a particularly pleasant experience. It starts with a burning, metallic taste in your throat. Della and I are just recovering."

And Mason dropped the receiver back into place before the astonished Paul Drake could think up any reply.

Chapter 12

It was a good three minutes before Mason could get himself up out of the depths of the chair and resume his search for Velma Starler.

He passed through heavy drapes and entered the reception hallway, tiptoeing his way along the waxed tiles. The wide sweep of the curved staircase with its wrought iron balustrades stretched gracefully upward. Somewhere a wall clock was ticking monotonously. Aside from that, there was no sign of life in the house.

Mason climbed the wide staircase, oblivious alike of architectural beauty and painstaking construction. To him the stairway was only a painfully laborious means of enabling his wobbling legs to reach the second floor.

In the upper corridor, Mason tiptoed down the long passageway looking for an open door. He felt certain that Velma Starler would be dozing fitfully, her clothes on, ears tuned for the slightest sound from her patients, a skillful nurse making intermittent rounds to see that her patients were all right, catching little catnaps in between.

Mason passed a long file of closed doors, then came to one that was open. He glanced inside.

He saw a sumptuous bedroom elaborately appointed. A bed had been slept in, the covers thrown down. It was quite evidently the bedroom of a woman. But even with the standard of luxury prevailing throughout the entire establishment. Mason had some difficulty realizing that this must be the bedroom of Velma Starler.

As he stood in the doorway, another door slightly ajar caught his eye and feeling certain that this would be far more apt to be the room he wanted, Mason moved with swiftly silent steps down to this partially opened door, gently pushed it farther open. Then, as the door swung on silent hinges so that he could see into the room, Mason abruptly caught himself. This was Banning Clarke's room.

A woman clad in a negligee was seated at the roll-top desk in the far corner. For the moment Mason could not recognize her, but the back of the head, the lines of the neck, and the slant of the shoulders hardly indicated Velma Starler. They were a little too heavy — a little too...

The woman half turned her head as though some faint sound had caught her ears.

Mason had no trouble in recognizing the profile. It was that of Lillian Bradisson, and the illumination from the green-shaded desk lamp on the top of the roll-top desk etched the lines of expression on her face-lines of cunning greed, an avarice which had become

unchained and had wiped all of the carefully cultivated smirk from her face. In that moment, Mrs. Bradisson's emotions had lost their protective covering and stood unpleasantly naked for his inspection.

Whatever slight noise had caused her to raise her head and listen was apparently dismissed as being of no consequence after a few seconds of motionless waiting. Her head swung back so that Mason could no longer see the face. Her shoulders moved slightly. Mason could not see her hands, but, after a moment, realized she was skillfully and thoroughly searching through the pigeonholes in the desk.

Mason stood silently in the doorway.

The woman at the desk was now too completely engrossed in what she was doing to listen for suspicious sounds. She was running through papers taken from each pigeonhole before pushing them back, then pulling out the contents of the next pigeonhole.

As Mason watched her, she found that for which she had evidently been searching — an oblong, folded document, which she unfolded and read. As she read, she turned to get the light on the page, so that Mason could once more see her face, could watch her expression of curiosity change to one of angry determination.

Mrs. Bradisson reached down through the opening in her negligee, took out another folded paper, so similar to the first at that distance as to be indistinguishable. She placed this paper back in the pigeonhole of the desk. Mason watched her push back the creaky, dilapidated swivel chair preparatory to rising, transfer the folded paper to her left hand, her right reaching toward the switch on the green-shaded desk lamp.

Quietly, Mason tiptoed down the corridor, picked the first door on the left and tried the knob. The door was unlocked.

Mason stepped far enough into the room to be invisible, in case Mrs. Bradisson should take occasion to look back down the corridor.

Someone was sleeping in this room, and Mason could hear the sound of gentle, rhythmic breathing.

The partially opened door caused a current of air to blow briskly through the room, billowing the curtains and sweeping directly across the bed and Mason, fearing that this current of air might arouse the sleeper, pulled the door almost shut, peering impatiently down the corridor, waiting for Mrs. Bradisson to emerge.

But Mrs. Bradisson didn't make her appearance. After almost two minutes, Mason heard a peculiar intermittent *thump — thump — thump* from the room where Mrs. Bradisson had been going through the contents of the roll-top desk. A moment later there was another series of pounding sounds.

Exasperated, Mason realized the predicament into which he had

betrayed himself. If he started once more toward the room to see what Mrs. Bradisson was doing, he was apt to meet her face to face as she emerged. If he remained where he was, he would be in complete ignorance of what was going on.

The sleeper stirred restlessly in the bed.

Mason resolved to take a chance. He stepped out into the corridor. At that moment, Mrs. Bradisson emerged from the room. Mason, caught between two fires, hastily stepped back into the bedroom.

Bedsprings creaked suddenly, a figure sat up in bed.

"Who is it?"

Mason, his hand on the knob of the door, standing poised on the threshold, grinned as he recognized Della Street's voice. He closed the door, said, "How do you feel, Della?"

"Oh, it's you! I woke up and saw someone standing there — there was something stealthy about — Is everything all right, Chief?"

"Everything's okay if *you're* feeling all right."

"I'm better," she said. "My gosh, wasn't that the most awful experience? — What time is it?"

"Getting along toward four o'clock," Mason said switching on the light.

"I've been sleeping quite a little while. I remember the nurse was in here. She gave me a hypodermic. Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm wobbly," Mason admitted. "You knew that Banning Clarke was dead?"

"Yes. Miss Starler told me they'd found him — but he wasn't poisoned. As I understand it, he'd been killed by a bullet."

"An interesting legal situation," Mason said sitting down on the edge of her bed. "Want a cigarette?"

"No, thanks. My mouth still has a peculiar taste. I don't think I'd enjoy it. — What about the legal situation?"

"Suppose," Mason said, "I should give you a dose of poison and you should die. That would be murder, wouldn't it?"

She laughed. "Sometimes when I've made mistakes I think it would be justifiable homicide. But go on. What's the idea?"

"But," Mason went on, "suppose that before the poison had quite resulted in death, someone came along, whipped out a gun, fired a fatal shot, and made his escape. — Who is guilty of murder?"

Della Street frowned. "Both of them," she ventured.

Mason shook his head. "Not unless there's a joint venture, or a conspiracy. In the absence of any joint effort, or any conspiracy, only one could be convicted of murder."

"Which one?"

"Figure it out."

“I can’t. You mean that the victim would have enough poison so that he’d surely die?”

“That’s right.”

“And was actually dying?”

“Yes. Only be a matter of minutes — perhaps seconds.”

Della Street said, “Well, in any event, I’m not going to bother about it now. I have other things to think of. *You* should wake me up at four o’clock in the morning to propound legal puzzles! Get out of here and let me dress. I take it you want to leave?”

Mason got up off the bed. “We,” he announced, “have work to do.”

“What sort of work?”

“I think,” he told her, “that what I am about to do is something that would be very irritating to Sam Gregory.”

Chapter 13

Mason paused in the doorway of the bedroom. "You're sure you are feeling well enough to travel?"

"Yes. I'm all right now. I felt, for a while, like a dishrag that had been tied in knots."

"Tell you what I want you to do, Della. Cover me while I go into this room down the hall, will you?"

"What do I do?"

"Stand here in the doorway. If you hear anyone coming, act as though you were just on the point of stepping out in the hall, start a conversation and—"

"But suppose that person goes into that room?"

"That's a chance I'll have to take. I can't avoid that. What I want to prevent is having anyone see me entering Banning Clarke's room or emerging from it."

"Okay. It doesn't make any difference who it is, you don't want *anyone* to know you're in there?"

"That's right."

"If Lieutenant Tragg should come back, I'll have trouble. He'll want to know just where you are."

"Yes," Mason said. "All we can do is pray. Raise your voice and greet whoever it is by name so I'll have a chance to know just what I'm up against. All ready?"

"Give me a few minutes to get my clothes on."

"No. I can't wait. I'm going to pop in that door now. Cover me. You can dress while you're keeping an eye on the corridor. All ready. Here I go."

Mason left the doorway, moved quietly down the corridor until he came abreast of the bedroom in which he had seen Mrs. Bradisson sitting at the desk. The door of this room was closed now. Mason opened it abruptly, darted into the room, closing the door behind him, and waiting for a moment, listening to see if Della Street gave any signal.

When he heard nothing, Mason clicked on the light switch near the door, flooding the room with brilliance, and went over to the roll-top desk. He had no difficulty finding the legal paper which Mrs. Bradisson had placed in the pigeonhole.

Mason unfolded it. It was a will dated the twelfth of July, 1941, apparently entirely in the handwriting of Banning Clarke. The will left everything to his beloved wife, Elvira, or "in the event she should predecease me, then to her lawful heirs at law-excluding, however, James Bradisson from any share in my said estate."

Mason wasted only a few seconds on the will. He hastily glanced through it, returned it to the pigeonhole in the desk, and then set himself to the task of finding what had caused the pounding noises he had heard after he had left the room.

Mason first gave the carpet a careful scrutiny. There was nothing to indicate that it had been lifted and then replaced. He tried all the edges, carefully inspected the corners. There were half a dozen framed photographs in the room. Mason moved them out from the walls, scrutinized the backs of the picture frames to see if the brads which held the cardboard in place had been removed and then replaced.

At the end of his search he could find no indication that any of the pictures had been tampered with.

There was *no* evidence that any nails or any tacks had been pounded into the walls. Mason turned chairs upside down, looked on the bottoms, looked also on the bottom of the table. He then lay down on the floor, flat on his back, and ran his hand along the under side of the drawer containers in the roll-top desk. When he found nothing here, he pulled out the drawers one by one, taking them entirely out of the desk and tilting them enough so he could see the bottom part of each drawer.

It was on the bottom of the lower drawer on the left-hand side that Mason found what he was looking for.

This was an old-fashioned desk made of the finest materials throughout, and the bottoms of the desk drawers were of a hard wood, which had made it necessary for Mrs. Bradisson to pound the thumbtacks in order to make certain they were driven in to the heads. This, Mason realized, accounted for the pounding noises he had heard.

It took Mason a few moments to empty the drawer of its contents, then turn the drawer bottom side up and inspect the document which had been laid out flat, and, in that position, fastened to the bottom of the drawer.

It was a will dated the preceding day. It was entirely in handwriting — an angular, somewhat cramped hand.

Mason opened the blade of his pocketknife, started to pry off the thumbtacks, then paused long enough to read the will.

The will read:

I, Banning Clarke, realizing, not only because of precarious health, but also because of certain sinister influences at work around me, that I may die suddenly and with no opportunity to pass on vital information to those whom I cherish, make this my last will and testament in words and figures as follows, to-wit:

First: I revoke all previous wills made by me.

Second: I give, devise and bequeath to Perry Mason the sum of two thousand five hundred dollars, which I trust will be accepted by the said Perry Mason in the nature of a fee to see that my wishes are carried out, and I leave it to his shrewd judgment and understanding to determine what these wishes are.

Third: I give, devise and bequeath to my nurse, Velma Starler, the sum of two thousand five hundred dollars.

Fourth: I give, devise and bequeath all of the rest, residue and remainder of my property to P. C. (Salty) Bowers, my friend and for years my partner.

There is one other person for whom I wish to provide, but I am unable to do so because any attempt to put a proper provision in my will would defeat its own purpose. I am leaving it to the perspicacity of my executor to understand what I have in mind. And as the only clue which I dare to give, I warn my executor that there is danger of the drowsy mosquito robbing of a valuable heritage the person I wish to benefit.

I nominate Perry Mason executor of this, my last will and testament, to serve without bond. I direct his attention to that which he will find in the right-hand small drawer in the upper pigeonhole compartment of the desk. It is the only clue I have so far been able to find, but it is highly significant. Entirely written, dated, and signed in the hand of the undersigned testator,

Banning Clarke.

Mason opened the little drawer described in the will. The drawer contained only a small glass phial. A few fine flakes of gold still adhered to the bottom of this bottle. But the thing that arrested Mason's attention was the only other thing in that bottle — a mosquito.

Even as the lawyer turned the bottle, the mosquito moved its legs slowly, gave a series of spasmodic kicks, then became motionless.

Mason unscrewed the top of the little phial, prodded the mosquito with the point of a pocket pencil.

The mosquito was dead.

Suddenly Mason's thoughtful contemplation was disturbed by Della Street's voice saying, "Oh, *hello, Lieutenant Tragg!* I was starting out to look for you. Can you tell me where Mr. Mason is?"

Mason heard Tragg say, "He's in the downstairs bedroom at the northwest corner. You'll find him there."

For a moment only, Della Street hesitated, then, keeping her voice

at the same high pitch, said, "Oh, so you and the sheriff weren't looking for *him*, then?"

It was Sheriff Gregory who rose to the bait. "We're going to take a look through Banning Clarke's room," he said. "We're trying to find out the motive for his murder."

Mason, working against time, prying at the heads of the tacks with his knife blade, heard Della Street say in a desperate attempt to get the men away from there, "Oh, but he's not in *that* downstairs bedroom. I've looked there already. You don't suppose anything could have happened to *him*?"

Sheriff Gregory seemed somewhat concerned. "You're sure he's not in the bedroom?"

"Why, yes. I looked down there about ten or fifteen minutes ago."

Mason got the tacks out and into his pocket. He folded the will and thrust it into the inside pocket of his coat. He then pushed things back into the desk drawer striving desperately for speed, yet daring to make no sound. The little phial went into his vest pocket.

Outside he heard the conversation going on, Gregory saying, "After all, I suppose we should have... Oh well, he's all right — probably out looking for evidence of some sort."

"Without even coming up here to see how I was getting along?"

"Well, he may have looked in — or had a report from the nurse."

"He'd have come up here," Della Street asserted positively, "unless," she added, "something has happened to *him*!"

The momentary silence which ensued indicated that there was a possibility Della might win a respite, but in the end it was Tragg who determined the matter. "We can just take a look in here, Sam. It'll only take a minute. We can look up Mason later."

"It would only take us a minute to look in on Mason."

Tragg's voice was weary. "For the last three years, Sam, I've been hoping I could get on a murder case where that guy was on the other side and at least have an even break. He's always beating me to the punches. This time he's laid up with a dose of poison and I intend to make my hay while the sun is shining. Come on, Sam, let's take a look... right now."

Mason replaced the desk drawer, settled back in the swivel chair, put his feet up on the desk, dropped his chin on his chest and remained motionless with his eyes closed, breathing deeply.

He heard the doorknob open, heard Sam Gregory say in surprise, "The light's on here." Then Tragg, "Well, for the love of Mike! Look who's *here*!"

Mason kept his head on his chest, his eyes closed, his breathing slow and regular.

Gregory said to Della Street, "Well, here he is, Miss Street."

Della's exclamation of surprise was, Mason thought, superbly done.

Tragg said, "Well, here we go again. The same old run-around. I suppose that if there *were* any clues in the place he's got them by this time."

Greggory said, "He doesn't get away with that in *this* county. If he's so much as touched anything in this room he'll find out he can't pull that stuff in this county and get away with it."

Mason kept his face absolutely devoid of expression, his lids closed, his breathing deep.

Tragg said, "It's a good stall, Mason, but not good enough. You may as well go through with it, however. Put on the rest of the act. Go on, wake up in startled surprise, blink your eyes, rub them with your knuckles, ask, 'What's going on?', pretend you don't know where you are for a minute. I've seen it done often enough to know the whole routine... I've even tried it myself on occasion."

Mason's breathing did not vary in the slightest.

"I think you forget," Della Street said with dignity, "that both of us have had hypodermics. I'm still groggy myself. I could hardly get awake."

Sheriff Greggory said, "That's right. You *did* have hypodermics, didn't you? Are you feeling all right now?"

"Only groggy," Della said. "I don't dare close my eyes or I'd drop right off to sleep. I guess it's all right for us to go now. The doctor didn't say anything about how long we were to stay here."

Mrs. Bradisson's voice said from the doorway, "*What* is it, please? What's going on here?"

"We were just looking around," Greggory said. His voice held that deferential tone a county official reserves for an influential taxpayer.

"Well, I must say that's rather an unusual way of doing things, isn't it? To come walking right into my house and—"

"You see, we haven't much time to waste," Lieutenant Tragg interposed. "We're doing this to protect you, Mrs. Bradisson. You and your son. We want to catch this murderer before he can strike again."

"Oh, I see. Well, I can appreciate your point — yes."

Mason heard Nell Sims' voice coming from down the corridor. "What is it, another one?" she asked.

"It's all right, Nell. You can go back to bed," Mrs. Bradisson said.

Della Street reached forward, grabbed Mason's shoulder and shook him. "Come on, Chief," she said. "Snap out of it. Wake up."

Mason mumbled indistinguishable words in a thick voice.

"It's that hypodermic," Della said, shaking him harder than ever. "Come on, Chief. Are you all right? Perhaps we'd better get that nurse. Oh, I hope he hasn't had a relapse. He *must* have gotten that poison

out of his system!”

Mason pushed his tongue into extra thickness against his teeth, made more sounds that could hardly be interpreted into words, then rolling his eyes toward the top of his head, raised his lids for a few brief flickers, closed them and slumped even lower in the chair.

Della Street kept shaking him, gently slapped his face. “Wake up, Chief,” she said. “Wake up. Tell me, are you all right?”

She dropped to her knees by his side, took his hand. Her voice was edged with anxiety. “Tell me, are you all right? — Are you all right? — Get that nurse someone, please. He’s sick.”

It was, Mason decided, a superb job of acting. Even he would have sworn there was almost a note of hysteria in the increasing anxiety manifested in Della Street’s voice.

He opened his eyes wider this time, gave Della Street a groggy smile, said thickly, “ ’S all right. Le’mee sleep.”

She was on her feet at his side again now, shaking him. “Chief, you’ve got to wake up. You’ve got to snap out of it. You’ve—”

Mason yawned prodigiously, opened his eyes, looked at her. “Full of drugs,” he announced, running the ends of his words together. “You all right?”

“Yes, yes. I’m all right. What are you doing in here?”

Mason, apparently shaking off the chains of slumber, looked around at the other occupants of the room in bewildered surprise. “What’s the matter? Has something happened?”

“No, no, everything’s all right. But how did you get in here? What are you doing here, Chief?”

He appreciated the quick-witted technique by which Della was giving him the opportunity to make explanations in advance of questions. “Came up to see how you were getting along,” he said. “You certainly were sleeping. I spoke to you but you didn’t even hear me, so I decided to wait until you awakened to tell you we’d start driving back as soon as you felt up to it. — I left your door open and sat down in the hall for a while. It was drafty there. I saw this door was open. It looked like an office so I came in and sat down in the swivel chair so I could hear you as soon as you moved. Guess I still have some of that drug in my system. — What’s new, Tragg?”

Tragg turned to his brother-in-law, made a little gesture with the palms of his hands. “There you are, Sam,” he said. “It’s always like that. You never can tell whether he’s thrown one across the center of the plate for a strike so fast that you can’t see it come, or whether he’s just winding up for practice.”

Greggory said ominously, “We don’t like to have fast ones pitched at us here in this county. When that happens we disqualify the pitcher.”

Mason yawned once more. "I don't blame you, Sheriff. I'd feel that way myself. Well, come on, Della. If you feel like traveling, we'll get started back. What's the excitement here? Did someone think I'd passed out?"

"No," Sheriff Gregory said. "We are taking steps to see that there are no more murders committed."

Nell Sims, from the outskirts of the group, chirped almost impersonally, "Locking up the horse after the stable has been stolen."

From outside came the raucous bray of a lonely burro.

Mason took Della Street's arm. His eyes met those of Mrs. Bradisson. She alone knew and could prove, if she chose, the falsity of Mason's story. To betray him, however, would of necessity force her to admit her own nocturnal intrusion into the room of the dead man.

"*Good morning*, Mrs. Bradisson," Mason said, bowing.

"*Good morning!*" she snapped.

Chapter 14

Lieutenant Tragg made himself at home in Mason's private office. "How you feeling?" he asked, his eyes hard and shrewd as he surveyed the lawyer.

"A little wobbly," Mason admitted, "but we're all right. I've got to take some depositions this afternoon. How's the doctor?"

"Coming along all right."

"How's the case?"

Tragg grinned. "*That's* out of my jurisdiction. That's up to brother-in-law, Sammy. However, Sammy's asking for assistance down here, and if he gets it the Chief will probably put me on the job."

"It has some local angle?" Mason asked, curiously.

Tragg nodded.

"Can you tell me what it is?"

"Not now."

"What have you found out about the murder of Clarke?"

"It's one of those things," Tragg said. "The story told by Salty Bowers is a weird procession of coincidences. And yet, it *may* be true."

"What's the story?" Mason asked.

"Clarke had told him a situation might arise where they'd have to take a quick trip to the desert. He swore he was feeling well enough to make such a trip if Salty would get everything all packed and ready to go as soon as he gave him a signal."

"And he gave him a signal last night?"

"Apparently so. Salty started out with his girl. He never even took her home. He dropped her down at the foot of the hill and told her she'd have to take a bus home. He doubled back and then packed everything into that old jalopy. And he made a quick job of rolling up the bedrolls, putting the pots and pans into the pack boxes. I guess he's done it often enough. He knows how to go about it. Claims it only took ten minutes."

"And the burros?"

"For a while," Tragg said, "they apparently figured on taking the burros, in a trailer. Then Clarke got afraid he might find the trip a little too much for him. So Salty investigated the possibilities of a house trailer, found Clarke could simply crawl aboard and go to bed just as though he were on a yacht. So it was arranged that Salty would make two trips, first to take Clarke out in a house trailer, and then come back, pick up the horse trailer, load in the burros and take them."

"What started all of this, anyway?" Mason asked.

"That's what I want to see you about. You did!"

“Me!” Mason raised his eyebrows in a gesture of elaborate surprise.

“Salty says that you gave Clarke some signal to get out, and Clarke tipped him off that now was the time to start.”

Mason grinned “I guess it was over that subpoena.”

“What subpoena?”

“This lawyer, Moffgat, started talking about taking depositions, and I had an idea from the way he was beating around the bush he was going to make an excuse to take Clarke’s deposition, apparently only in connection with that fraud case, and then go on a general fishing expedition to see if he couldn’t dig out some information about an entirely different matter.”

“What matter?”

Mason merely grinned.

“How did *you* know about this plan of Moffgat’s?”

“Well, Della caught a glimpse of a subpoena in his brief case when he pulled out a stipulation to take the deposition of Pete Sims.”

“That deposition you’re going to take this afternoon?”

“Yes.”

“Why don’t you have it postponed?” Tragg asked solicitously. “You’re not feeling well and...”

“Thanks very much indeed for your consideration — I may say your *rare* consideration — of my health,” Mason grinned. “But I’d like to have the deposition taken and get it over with. The longer Moffgat waits, the more questions he’ll think of. I seem to have done quite a bit of passing out — what with sickness and drugs. Where was everyone during the course of the evening?”

“Various places,” Tragg said evasively. “We’re checking on them.”

“Apparently Salty is the only one you want to talk about.”

“I think he’s the only one you can assist me on.”

“What do you want to know?”

“The exact reason Clarke started for the desert.”

“What does Salty say?”

“Simply that you tipped him off.”

Mason shook his head. “I’m afraid he misunderstood my signal.”

Tragg regarded the lawyer speculatively.

“Also,” Tragg went on, “what you were doing in Clarke’s room when Sam and I came in.”

“Waiting for Della Street,” Mason replied innocently enough, and then added with a prodigious yawn, “It makes me sleepy every time I think about it.”

Tragg said dryly, “It makes me a little tired myself. Did you know Clarke had left a will in that desk?”

“Did he, indeed?”

Tragg made as if to go. "I guess I'm just an incurable optimist," he announced. "I always kid myself into believing you *might* say something you didn't intend to, some day."

"Just what happened to Clarke?" Mason asked. "Exactly how did he die?"

"Just about the way it's in the papers," Tragg said. "They started for the desert. Salty was up in front driving. Clarke was stretched out on the bed in this house trailer apparently sleeping. It was something of a novel experiment for both of them. They'd neglected to provide any means of communication by which Clarke could get in touch with Salty up in front. And that pickup made such a choice assortment of noises Salty couldn't have heard a clap of thunder, let alone a shout.

"Salty stopped, after they got out a way on their trip, to see how his passenger was making it. He found him very ill and weak, with the same symptoms of arsenic poisoning that the Bradissons had shown. Salty jumped back into the pickup, turned around, and drove like mad back to San Roberto. He rushed to Dr. Kenward's house. Dr. Kenward wasn't there. Salty went down to a drugstore that was open all night, telephoned the hospital, said he had a poisoned man and was coming right out. He went through a boulevard stop. A radio prowl car picked him up. He kept right on driving, shouting fragmentary explanations to the officers. They went ahead with the siren clearing the way, and reported to headquarters. And that, as the radio commentators say, is all the news right up to this moment. That is — all that I'm going to tell you."

"It was the bullet that killed him?" Mason asked.

"The bullet killed him," Tragg admitted.

"But he was dying of poison?"

"Well..." Tragg hesitated.

"What does the post-mortem show?" Mason asked.

Tragg smiled. "I think I'll save that."

Chapter 15

George V. Moffgat was full of eager efficiency and impatience to get on with the matter in hand. But he went through the motions of being politely solicitous. “You’re certain you feel like *going* ahead with these depositions, Counselor?”

“I think I can make it all right,” Mason said.

“Why don’t you wait a day or two?”

“Oh, it’s all right. I’ll go ahead. I’m feeling a little wobbly, that’s all.”

Jim Bradisson said, “Any time will suit me. Don’t bother about inconveniencing me, Mr. Mason. I appreciate the circumstances and I’ll be glad to...”

“No. It’s all right,” Mason told him.

Moffgat turned to the notary public with the alert eagerness that characterizes a Boston bull pup about to pounce on a ball as soon as it is tossed by his master.

Moffgat announced, “This is the time and place heretofore fixed for taking the deposition of Peter G. Sims, one of the defendants in the action of Come-Back Mining Syndicate versus Sims et al., and of James Bradisson, the president of that mining company. The defendants are represented by Mr. Perry Mason. I represent the plaintiff. The witnesses are both present ready to be sworn.”

The notary public said, “This deposition is being taken pursuant to stipulation, gentlemen?”

“That’s right,” Mason said.

“Correct,” Moffgat announced.

“The witness, Sims, will be sworn,” the notary public said.

Pete Sims looked inquiringly at Perry Mason.

“Stand up,” Mason said.

Sims, a gaunt man in the fifties, with the whimsically woebegone facial expression of a man who has wrestled with life and been worsted in the fight, stood up.

“Hold up your right hand.”

Sims raised his right hand.

The notary public made something of a ceremony of administering the oath. “Do you solemnly swear that the testimony you are about to give in the case of Come-Back Mining Syndicate versus Sims et al., will be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?”

There was awed solemnity in Pete Sims’ voice. “I do,” he promised, then sat down, crossed his legs, and looked with cherubic innocence at George Moffgat.

Moffgat opened the brief case, jerked out a file of papers, hitched a small suitcase into position near his right hand, glanced at the court stenographer who had been selected to take down everything that was said, then turned to the witness. "Your name is Peter Sims. You are the husband of Nell Sims. You are familiar with the mining claims known as the Shooting Star Group?"

"That's right," Pete agreed in a drawl of disarming frankness.

"Some six months ago, Mr. Sims, you had a conversation with Mr. James Bradisson, did you not?"

"I'm talking with him all the time," Pete said, and then added, "off and on."

"But about six months ago you had a specific conversation in which you told him about discovering certain ore on the Shooting Star claims, didn't you?"

"Well, now," Sims drawled, "I just can't remember."

"You mean you can't remember a conversation you had ninety days ago?"

Sims said, "I guess I'll have to explain."

"I guess you will," Moffgat said sarcastically.

"Well," Pete said, "it's like this. I've got one of these here split personalities you read about. Most of the time I'm me, but every so often Bob takes charge — and then I just ain't me."

Moffgat snapped, "You're under oath, Mr. Sims."

"Sure I'm under oath," Mr. Sims said.

There was gloating triumph in Moffgat's voice. "Go right ahead, Mr. Sims," he said. "Remember you're under oath. Tell us about your split personality and why you can't remember your conversation with Mr. James Bradisson."

"Well, it's like this," Pete explained, glancing guilelessly at the somewhat startled notary public. "Personally, I'm a pretty good sort of a fellow. I can take a drink or I can leave it alone. I'm ambitious and I want to get ahead, and I'm truthful. I'm in love with my wife and I think I'm a pretty good husband."

Mason said, "Make your answer responsive to the question, Mr. Sims."

Moffgat snapped, "He considers it responsive and so do I. Go right ahead, Mr. Sims. I want you to explain about this split personality. Remembering, of course, that you are now under oath."

"That's right," Sims said. "Well, I call this other personality Bob. He may have some other name. I don't know what it is. To me, he's just Bob. — Well, I'll be getting along all right, and all of a sudden Bob will come and take possession of me. And when that happens, I just pass out. I just don't know what Bob does while he's sort of in charge of things."

“Do you,” Moffgat asked triumphantly, “have any preliminary warning when this secondary personality is about to take possession of you?”

“Only a sort of a thirst,” Sims said. “I’ll get this awful thirst and sort of head toward some place where there’s a cool drink of beer, and about the time I get that beer ordered, Bob will take charge. — Now I was going to tell you about the difference between me and Bob.”

“Go right ahead,” Moffgat said, “That’s what I want to hear.”

“Well, Bob can’t leave booze alone. He’s an awful drunkard. That’s what makes it so annoying to me. Bob will be sort of runnin’ things and take me out and get me awful drunk. Then when I wake up with a headache, Bob is gone. It wouldn’t be so bad if Bob would stick around to wrestle with the hangover, but he never does that. He pushes me out and has all the fun of doing the drinking, and then goes away and leaves me to handle the headache that comes the next day.”

“I see,” Moffgat said. “Now getting back to this sale of the mine to Mr. Bradisson who was acting on behalf of the plaintiff in the action. You have no recollection of what you told him about that mine?”

“I only know I was talking to him about mining property, and then all of a sudden I felt that funny thirst, and Bob must have come in then because the next I remember was waking up with an awful hangover about two days later, and a lot of money in my pocket.”

“And,” Moffgat said, “you gave him certain samples of ore which you told him you’d personally taken from the Shooting Star Mine, didn’t you?”

“Well, now, I can’t remember about that.”

“Would you say that you did, or that you did not?”

“Well, I think there’s a pretty good chance that he might have got the ore from me while Bob was in the driver’s seat.”

“Now then,” Moffgat went on, “that ore had not been obtained from the Shooting Star Mining Group. That ore consisted of some samples that had been taken by you from specimens Mr. Banning Clarke was keeping in the lower drawer of a roll-top desk in his room, isn’t that right?”

“I’m not saying anything about those samples because I can’t remember a thing in the world about them.”

“Now this secondary personality which you call Bob didn’t assume charge until after you had started talking with Mr. Bradisson about the Shooting Star Group?”

“Well, I can’t remember exactly. We started talking about mining claims — and of course, since my wife owned this mining property, I *may* have said something about it. That is, before Bob came. After that, I don’t know what happened.”

Moffgat’s voice became silky. “I understand your position exactly,

Mr. Sims. You, yourself, under no circumstances would be guilty of any fraudulent representation, but there are times when you are not exactly responsible, times when this secondary personality takes over and you are placed in the embarrassing position of being held responsible for things which were done without your knowledge and entirely without your volition."

"That's right," Sims agreed. And then, after a moment's thought, added with great emphasis, "That's *right!*" He beamed at the lawyer with that warm friendliness which is inspired by perfect understanding.

"Now then," Moffgat resumed, "on this day in question, *you* certainly had no idea, when you started out, that this impish secondary personality would lead you to defraud Mr. James Bradisson, did you?"

"I most certainly didn't. Mr. Bradisson is my friend and I wouldn't do a thing in the world to harm him. I just wouldn't harm a hair of his head."

Bradisson rubbed a well-manicured hand over his practically bald dome, and let his eyes soften into a twinkle.

Moffgat went on suavely, "You yourself had no intention, not even the most remote intention, of trying to sell any mining claims to James Bradisson that day, did you?"

"Absolutely not."

"Now, had Bob been in possession of your personality at any time shortly prior to this conversation you had with Bradisson?"

"You mean that same day?"

"Oh, that day or within a day or two of that time," Moffgat said carelessly.

"No, he hadn't. He'd been letting me alone pretty much. And *that* should have been a warning to me too, because Bob only stays away about so long, then the thirst catches him and he comes in and takes charge."

"I understand. But Bob definitely hadn't been in what you refer to as 'the driver's seat' during any time within three or four days prior to your conversation with Bradisson?"

"That's right."

"Then," Moffgat sneered, dropping his suave manner, and appearing suddenly belligerent, "*how* do you account for the fact that you went to that conference with Mr. Bradisson with your pockets loaded with samples of ore that you had filched from the lower drawer in Banning Clarke's roll-top desk?"

Expression popped into Sims' face. His complacency was suddenly jarred as the full impact of that question dawned on him. He shifted his position uneasily in the chair.

“Go ahead, answer that question,” Moffgat stormed at the dismayed witness.

“Well, now... Now wait a minute. You ain’t sure those rocks came from Clarke’s desk.”

Moffgat triumphantly produced a small suitcase, opened it, thrust a rock out in front of the witness. “You see that specimen of ore?”

“I do,” Sims said without touching it.

“And you see this one which is marked with a little cross which has been chiseled into the surface of the rock. Isn’t this marked rock one of the specimens you gave James Bradisson, and isn’t that rock absolutely identical with this other specimen which came from Banning Clarke’s group of mines — the ones that are known as the Sky High Group?”

Sims fidgeted for a moment more, then suddenly blurted, “I never gave that rock to Bradisson.”

“You mean you didn’t give him this rock with the cross chiseled on it — the rock I am now showing to you?”

“No, I didn’t,” Sims said positively. “It’s his word against mine. I didn’t give it to him.”

“At no time during the conversation, or during the negotiations leading up to the signing of this contract with James Bradisson, did you give him this rock and tell him that it had been taken by you from this Shooting Star mining group, and represented a new strike you had made in that group of mines?”

“No, sir, I didn’t.” Sims’ manner was now dogged and stubborn.

“You’re certain of that?”

“Absolutely.”

“How can you be certain?” Moffgat asked, smiling triumphantly down at the witness. “You don’t remember a thing of that conversation. Your split personality was in charge at that time — Bob, as I believe you have mentioned, was ‘in the driver’s seat.’”

The witness ran his left hand up along his head, scratched at the hair over his left temple. “Well, now,” he said, “my memory’s beginning to come back mighty clear on that. Maybe it *wasn’t* because Bob had taken over. Maybe it was just because I’d got a little drunk and couldn’t remember things very clearly.”

“During the time that you were discussing this mine with Mr. Bradisson, you had been drinking?”

“That’s right.”

“And couldn’t remember things very clearly?”

“That’s right.”

“Then how can you testify positively that you didn’t give Mr. Bradisson this rock, together with certain other rocks, and tell him that these were specimens of a body of ore you had just uncovered in

your wife's claims — the Shooting Star mining group?"

"Well," Sims said, squirming uncomfortably, "I'm beginning to remember it a lot clearer now."

"Would you say that your memory was clear on the subject?"

"Well, pretty clear."

"Then this secondary personality that you have referred to as Bob wasn't in charge at all. He didn't enter into the picture?"

"Well, I—I don't *think* he did. Not the way things look now."

Moffgat sarcastically slammed his file of papers closed, popped it into his brief case and slid the zipper in a dramatic gesture. "That," he announced, "is *all!*"

He turned to Mason and said, "Well, Counselor, you certainly aren't going to contest this case any further, in view of the circumstances. Are you?"

Mason said gravely, "I don't know. I'll give the matter some thought."

"Humph!" Moffgat said. "It's so dead open and shut that there's nothing to it."

"Don't forget," Mason said as Moffgat started to get up, "there's another deposition to be taken — that of James Bradisson."

"But surely, Mr. Mason, you don't want to take Bradisson's deposition *now*."

"Why not?"

"Because the deposition just taken is completely determinative of the case. You can't possibly avoid the charge of fraud now. Your own witness has virtually admitted it. If you went into court you wouldn't have a leg to stand on."

"But," Mason insisted, "I would like to take Bradisson's deposition. Even without a leg to stand on, I can still talk."

"Well, I don't see what for," Moffgat snapped testily. "I'm not aware of any rule of law that says you can avoid fraud after that fraud has once been established, by browbeating the defrauded party."

Mason said, "I want to take his deposition — and I intend to do it."

"Stand up," Moffgat said irritably to Bradisson. "Hold up your right hand and be sworn. If Mr. Mason is going to derive any comfort from questioning you, I suppose we'll have to let him."

Bradisson rose, held up his right hand, listened to the oath, said, "I do," and then grinned at Perry Mason. "Go right ahead, Mr. Mason. Although I don't think I have anything to add to what Pete Sims has said."

"You're an officer of the Come-Back Mining Syndicate?"

"President."

"And have been such for how long?"

"Oh, about a year or so."

"You inherited a substantial block of stock from your sister, Mrs. Banning Clarke?"

"Yes."

"And as president of the corporation, you determine its policies?"

"Isn't that what a president is for?"

"I'm merely trying to get the facts in the record," Mason said.

"Well, I'm *no* stuffed ornament. I was elected by the directors to run the company, and I'm trying to do so — to the best of my ability," he added virtuously.

"Exactly. You're acquainted with Nell Sims, the wife of Pete Sims, the witness who just testified?"

"That's right."

"How long have you known her?"

"Oh, I don't know. A year or so, perhaps a few months longer than that. I met her originally in Mojave."

"Where she was running a restaurant?"

"Yes."

"And you also met Pete Sims up there?"

"I think so. I may have."

"And for the last year you have been more or less intimately associated with them. They've been living in the same house. She has been acting in the capacity of general cook and housekeeper?"

"That's right."

Moffgat said, "I object to all this waste of time. You can't change the fact of fraud if you question this man until Doomsday."

Mason paid no attention to the interruption, went on in a conversational, intimate tone with his examination.

"And during that time you've had occasion to see Pete Sims rather frequently?"

"Quite frequently. That is — what I might say was in between intervals."

"What intervals?"

"When he isn't on a spree. I suppose he would express it as 'when Bob isn't in the saddle.'"

"So you've known about Bob for some time?"

"Oh, yes."

"Now about six months ago, Mr. Sims returned from the desert and told you about a strike he had made?"

"Yes. He said he'd been doing some assessment work on his wife's claims and had made this strike. He thought the ore was very rich indeed. He showed me the ore. I thought it was very good ore. I told him that the syndicate might be willing to take the claims over at a fair price."

“And you subsequently agreed on a price?”

“We bought the claims, yes.”

“And how much of the price has been paid?”

“We paid the original cash payment and then filed this suit to rescind the contract on the ground of fraud and be relieved of any further liability on payment of purchase price.”

“When did you first learn that you had been defrauded?”

“Well, the report of the assayer came in and then, weeks later, it came to my attention that the peculiar combination of minerals in the ore was exactly the same and in exactly the same amounts as appeared in another claim that was a part of the corporation properties — claims we had optioned from Banning Clarke.”

Mason said, “Had you had much mining experience when you became president of the corporation?”

“I hadn’t had much experience on the ground, but I knew a great deal about mining, and I had a natural aptitude for it. I picked up the practical points rather quickly — unusually fast, to be more truthful than modest.”

“So that you consider yourself thoroughly competent to be the president of a mining corporation having rather extensive interests?”

“If I hadn’t, I never would have accepted the presidency. I have made a detailed study of all forms of mining, Mr. Mason, and particularly of the properties of the Come-Back Mining Syndicate and of the problems pertaining to those properties.”

“And you’re a fair judge of character, Mr. Bradisson?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that after you had an opportunity to see and study Mr. Sims, you had a pretty good idea of his general character?”

“Well, yes — if you want to go into that.”

“You yourself went out and looked over his mining properties before the deal was closed?”

“Naturally. I would hardly obligate my stockholders to pay out a large sum of cash for something I hadn’t looked at personally.”

“You went down in the little shaft?”

“It isn’t so little. It’s down some fifty feet, and then it runs on a drift back about one hundred and thirty-five or forty feet.”

“You inspected the ore in that shaft?”

“Certainly.”

“Before you signed up the agreement to buy?”

“Of course. The rich samples I found were planted.”

“You’ve heard about Mr. Sims’ mischievous second personality, the inscrutable Bob, who forces Pete’s unwilling body to depart from the narrow path of rectitude and into the ways of inebriation?” Mason asked.

Bradisson laughed. "I certainly have, Mr. Mason. You'll pardon me if I laugh, but I thought you expressed that rather neatly."

"Thank you. And you've had an opportunity to hear many of these stories of what Bob has done when he's taken over the control of Mr. Sims' body?"

"Oh, yes."

"And I take it you've formed something of an opinion of Bob?"

Bradisson said, "Let's not misunderstand each other, Mr. Mason. This so-called Bob has absolutely no existence whatever. Pete Sims simply uses him as a scapegoat. He's an alibi. Whenever Pete gets a little out of line or does something he shouldn't, he claims that he has no memory of what occurred, and that this secondary personality has taken over. This so-called Bob is merely his way of making excuses to his wife. She may or may not believe him. At any rate, she does nothing to discourage his prevarications. Because of that, Pete Sims has developed a rather childish, immature attitude. His wife swallows his falsehoods with such ease and apparent gullibility that the man doesn't even bother his brain to think up good lies. — Just by way of illustration, you can see how easily Mr. Moffgat trapped him today — although I don't want to take any of the credit from Mr. Moffgat for a brilliant piece of cross-examination. However, the fact remains that Sims has a childish faith in the efficacy of his own falsehoods that keeps him from using ordinary care in thinking them up. This business of a secondary personality has been too easy for him."

Mason's face and voice both showed surprise. "You mean that he has deliberately built up the fiction of this secondary personality?"

"Of course," Bradisson said, his voice and manner showing some disdain for Mason's attempt at acting. "Surely, Mr. Mason, you didn't expect to establish that there actually *was* any such secondary personality."

"Of course I haven't had the benefit of such an intimate acquaintance as you. I have merely met the man, but he seemed sincere enough when he told me about his secondary personality. I was hoping you could confirm his statements."

"Don't insult my intelligence, Mr. Mason."

"And you mean that Mr. Sims deliberately lies about this?"

"Of course."

"How long have you known this?" Mason asked.

"Almost ever since I first met him. It should be apparent to anyone of discernment. He is a thoroughly disreputable old reprobate, and an awful liar. Remember that you asked for this, Mr. Mason. There's a certain likable streak in him, but he's just a periodic drunkard and a congenital liar as well as being basically dishonest. He tries to account for his shortcomings by telling falsehoods even a child

wouldn't believe.

"Understand me, Mr. Mason, you're the one who brought this up. But since you've brought it up, I don't mind telling you frankly that I wouldn't trust him, to use a colloquial expression, as far as I could throw a bull by the tail. He's a crooked old reprobate with no conscience, and only a limited intelligence.

"He's clever in just one thing, and that's his ability to apparently get drunk, pretend there's some information he's trying to keep from spilling, and then let you pry it out of him in an unguarded moment that he's struck it rich. In other words, he's a very, very good actor, and that's all. He can act a lie infinitely better than he can tell one."

"Thank you," Mason said. "That's all."

"That's all?" Moffgat asked in some surprise.

"Yes."

Moffgat's face was crafty. "You understand, Mr. Mason, that I have a right to cross-examine this witness?"

"Naturally."

"Despite the fact that he is my client."

"I understand."

"Upon *any* matter concerning which you have examined him in direct examination."

"That's my understanding of the law."

"And you yourself, Counselor, have opened the door."

Mason merely made a little bow.

"Now then," Moffgat said, turning to Bradisson with a smirk, "I will ask you, Mr. Bradisson, if you are familiar with the reputation for truth and veracity of this Mr. Peter Sims."

"I am."

"What is it?"

"It's terrible."

"He isn't considered trustworthy among those who know him?"

"Absolutely not."

"Would you believe his testimony under oath?"

"Definitely not."

"That's all," Moffgat announced triumphantly.

Mason said, "I guess that completes our depositions." He rose, stretched and yawned.

"And you're seriously going to proceed with the contest of this action?" Moffgat asked him.

Mason turned on him. "Go back to your office and read up on the law of fraud, Counselor. You'll find that it takes a lot more than a fraudulent representation to give a person a cause of action for fraud. The representation must be believed. It must be acted upon. It must be relied upon. Your own client has now stated that he considers Pete

Sims an awful liar; that he wouldn't trust him as far as he could throw a bull by the tail; that he wouldn't place any reliance in anything he said; that he himself is a mining expert; that he himself made an examination of that mine before he purchased it. Therefore, it is obvious that the thing he relied upon was his own judgment, his faith in his own infallibility. — There are times Counselor, when it pays dividends to have a poor reputation. — After you've read the law of fraud once more, see whether you want to go ahead with *your* side of the case."

Bradisson turned to regard Moffgat. It needed only one look at the sudden consternation he saw on his lawyer's face to make him realize the deadly accuracy of Mason's statement.

"But my client hasn't said that he relied on his own judgment," Moffgat said. "That is, he didn't specifically so state."

"Wait until a jury hears that deposition read," Mason grinned. "The man with the natural aptitude for absorbing mining knowledge; who was thoroughly capable of directing the destinies of a big mining corporation before he permitted himself to become president; who didn't need to call in any mining engineer to help him; who made his *own* inspection and *then* went ahead and closed the deal before the reports of assay had been returned. — Don't argue with me. Save your argument for a jury. And incidentally, Counselor, you aren't convincing your own client and you aren't convincing yourself."

Moffgat said, "I think you misunderstood the witness's statement in regard to the investigation he himself had made of the property, Mr. Mason. The witness will have an opportunity, of course, to read through his deposition and sign it before it's filed. I happen to know the facts of the case myself, and I know that Mr. Bradisson's investigation was *not* of the kind that would prevent him rescinding the contract on the ground of fraud."

And Moffgat flashed his client a warning glance to make certain that Bradisson remained silent.

Mason smiled. "Read the case of Beckley versus Archer, 74 Cal. App. 489, which holds that even where one didn't make an independent investigation, where he fully disbelieved the representations made by the seller as to the character of the property, he still can't rely upon fraud, no matter how flagrant the fraud may have been. Bear in mind that your client stated that he wouldn't trust Pete Sims as far as he could throw a bull by the tail."

Moffgat combed his mind for an answer and could find none. Abruptly he turned on Mason and said, "I'll discuss that angle of the case with you in court, Mr. Mason. In the meantime, there's another matter that I wish to take up with you."

"What is it?"

"You hold the stock which Banning Clarke held in the Come-Back Mining Syndicate,"

"That's right. I do."

"I take it that you know a will has been discovered."

"Has it indeed?"

"A will dated some time ago leaving all of his property to his wife, or in the event of his wife's death, to her heirs at law, excluding, however, Mr. James Bradisson."

"Indeed," Mason commented noncommittally.

"I am sorry," Moffgat went on punctiliously, "that Mr. Clarke felt it necessary to put that proviso in his will. It is a direct, unnecessary and entirely unwarranted slap in the face — a gratuitous disparagement of a man who has always tried to be his friend."

Bradisson looked properly virtuous.

"However," Moffgat went on, "be that as it may, Mrs. Bradisson is the sole heir at law, and, as such, will inherit the property. She is filing the will for probate. Now, naturally, Mr. Mason, you won't try to keep that stock, but will turn it over without any delay to the executrix."

"Why should I?" Mason asked.

"Because we know that sale was not an actual sale at all."

"Who says it wasn't?"

"Will you claim that any consideration was actually paid for the transfer?"

"Certainly."

"Would you mind telling me what that consideration was?"

"I see no reason for doing so."

"I think you are aware, Mr. Mason, that as an attorney you were acting in a fiduciary capacity, that any contract you made with your client would be presumed fraudulent, that any undue advantage you took of your client would be a very serious matter — might possibly become grounds for an accusation of unprofessional conduct."

"That sounds like a threat, Moffgat."

"Perhaps it is — and *I* don't make idle threats."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"And do I understand that, despite my demand, you refuse to surrender this stock?"

"That's it in a nutshell."

"That, Mr. Mason, is going to make things very, very unpleasant. It will create a certain amount of personal friction between us."

"Oh well," Mason said, "differences of opinion make horse races and lawsuits."

"But this is more than a mere piece of litigation. It will be necessary for me to contest the ethics of your actions. The controversy

will become personal and bitter.”

“That’s fine! I like combat. I like the acrimonious personalities of a grudge fight. — And now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll return to my office.”

And Mason walked out of the office without so much as a backward glance from the doorway.

Chapter 16

Della Street spread the afternoon newspaper on Mason's desk. "Look at our friend, Paul Drake," she said.

Mason regarded the picture with an approving eye — a photograph of Paul Drake clad in tattered shirt, patched overalls, wearing a big battered Stetson, leading a burro that had on its back a canvas-covered pack. A pick, shovel and gold pan were roped to the outside of the pack. The entire picture carried an air of authenticity. Paul Drake had managed to get just the proper expression of good-natured sincerity on his face. In the photograph he seemed lean and brown and hard, toughened by years of clean living in the desert. His extended right hand held a buckskin sack.

Underneath the photograph was the caption: "P. C. Drake, Who Claims To Have Rediscovered Famous Lost Mine. In the photo Drake is shown handing a sack of gold nuggets to Harvey Brady, wealthy Las Alisas cattleman. Story on page six."

The newspaper account was in a position of prominence on page six. Headlines read: "PROSPECTOR LOCATES LOST BONANZA. Southern California cattle king shares clue with penniless prospector."

Mason read the story with a great deal of interest. Harvey Brady, prominent cattleman of Las Alisas had, it seemed, always wanted to be a prospector, but Fate decreed that he should go into the cattle business on a small scale, make *money*, invest in more cattle, and then become one of the Southland's leading cattle barons. But always in the back of his mind was the desire to prospect.

Because his extensive business interests prevented his going into the desert personally, Brady began reading about mines and mining, and, in particular, about the famous lost mines of the Southwest. Painstakingly, laboriously, he devoured every scrap of information that was available, gradually built up one of the most complete reference libraries in the Southwest.

Fearing ridicule, Brady kept his hobby from even his closest friends and associates. Men who had known the cattle king for years never entertained the slightest suspicion that he was interested in lost mines and through intensive research work had developed certain theories by which some of these lost mines might be relocated.

So it was that when some six months ago Brady was motoring through the desert, Fate, which had decreed that Brady should become a cattle king instead of a prospector, apparently decided to reward Brady for his continued interest. At the exact moment when Harvey Brady was driving across the desert to Las Vegas, Nevada, to attend an important livestock conference, P. C. Drake, a typical desert

prospector, was sadly shuffling along the hot stretch of desert pavement between Yermo and Windmill Station, lamenting the fact that his burro had died in the desert, and that the only part of his worldly belongings Drake could salvage were the things he could carry on his own back.

Drake, plodding along the highway, heard the sound of brakes and looked up to see the friendly grin of the cattleman. A few moments later Drake, with his heavy pack thrown into the trunk of Harvey Brady's automobile, was being speeded along the highway toward Windmill Station.

In the conversation which ensued, it appeared that Drake was familiar with a section of the desert in which Harvey Brady had concluded one of the famous lost mines was probably located.

Drake didn't stop at Windmill Station. He went on to Las Vegas as the guest of Harvey Brady. All during the cattlemen's convention, Drake stayed in Brady's hotel. Whenever the cattleman could get a minute to spare, he would be in Drake's room getting better acquainted, sizing up his man.

Then, on the last day of the convention, Brady made his proposition. He would grubstake Drake. Drake would cease prospecting for just any good body of ore and become, instead, a desert detective tracking down a certain route which Brady deduced must have been followed by one of the men who had located, and subsequently lost, one of the richest mines in the entire Southwest.

The newspaper went on: "Naturally, both parties are secretive as to the detailed conversation which ensued, but an agreement was reached. That agreement culminated yesterday afternoon when Brady, who had all but forgotten the penniless prospector he picked up in the desert, received the welcome news that his powers of deduction had resulted in once more locating one of the most fabulously rich lost mines of the desert.

"And as Fate rang down the curtain on this little drama of casting bread upon the waters, prospector Drake was in the act of handing to Harvey Brady a buckskin sack containing several hundred dollars worth of placer gold which had been picked up in less than twenty-five minutes. It had been found at what must have been the exact spot where two-thirds of a century ago a man went so delirious with joy over the discovery of great wealth that he was unable even to find the place again."

Mason chuckled. "I'll hand it to Paul Drake," he said. "He did a good job."

"And to Harvey Brady," Della Street said. "He certainly was a good sport to tag along."

"He was for a fact. His friends will probably give him an

unmerciful ribbing when the blowoff takes place. But, in the meantime, Brady certainly has dressed the thing up for us.”

Della Street’s eyes twinkled. “Somehow I think he got an awful kick out of doing it, too. He has that whimsical sense of humor that makes him so refreshing.”

“And a loyalty to his friends which makes him so dependable,” Mason said. “We haven’t heard anything from Paul Drake?”

“Not a word.”

“I told him to do a little celebrating,” Mason said.

“Drake would enjoy celebrating on an expense account.”

“And how! Let’s see if we can get Brady on the phone, Della.”

Della Street moved over to the telephone on her secretarial desk, gave instructions to Gertie at the switchboard, and within a few minutes had the cattleman on the line.

Mason said, “Sorry I had to ask so much of you on such short notice, Brady. I’ll explain as soon as I see you.”

“Never explain,” Brady said. “A friend who needs explanations isn’t worth keeping. Whenever you ask a cattleman to do something for you, he either tells you to go to hell or he does it and is tickled to death. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Not a thing right now,” Mason told him.

“Your man Drake is getting stinko. Is it all right?”

“It’s all right.”

“He said you wanted him stinko in public so he could make inopportune statements. However, he was just a little under the weather when he made that statement, so I’ve played it safe by keeping him shut up.”

“Isn’t that quite a job?” Mason asked.

“Not so much. He got away once and started running, but I brought him back on the end of a riata and he’s been more tractable since.”

“Is he in any condition to drive a car?” Mason asked.

“Hell, no.”

“Do you have someone who could take him up to Mojave and turn him loose?”

“In his present condition?”

“Yes.”

“Sure. I’ll drive him up myself. If you want to see a couple of real old-time prospectors on the loose, come to Mojave and watch Paul Drake and Harvey Brady celebrating their great strike.”

“I may at that,” Mason said, laughing. “Only don’t—”

Mason heard over the phone the crash of what was evidently breaking glass.

Brady said, “Shucks, that locoed maverick’s jumped through the

window.” Then Mason heard the noise as the receiver was dropped, followed by a series of regular rhythmic thumps as the receiver *swung back and forth*, striking the wall at the end of each pendulum-like swing. He heard Harvey Brady shouting, “Don’t get on that horse! — He bucks!” Then the line went dead.

Mason sighed, hung up the receiver, said to Della, “Were you listening in on that call?”

She nodded. “Sounds as though Paul Drake were learning to be a cowboy.”

“The hard way,” Mason agreed.

Della said, “I’ll see what I can find out about the others.”

Fifteen minutes later she brought him the information. Salty

Bowers had been questioned and released by the police. His house trailer was being held by the police, so Salty had simply substituted the horse trailer, loaded in the burros, and departed for parts unknown.

Dr. Kenward, suffering from shock, with some slight danger of subsequent infection from the wound, had gone out into the! desert somewhere in search of quiet. Velma Starler was with him.

Mason said, “Get hold of the detective agency. Let’s see if we can pick up Salty Bowers’ trail somewhere.”

Della went down the hall to the office of the Drake Detective Agency, returned to report they had men on the job. “How did you come out with your depositions?” she asked.

“Think I cracked their fraud case, wide open.”

“I’ll bet that made Moffgat furious.”

Mason nodded.

“You’d better watch him. If you best him twice in a row he’ll be trying to get something on you.”

“That’s just it,” Mason admitted. “He’s on the trail of something.”

“What?”

“That stock certificate. He’s not certain of his ground yet, but he’s thinking. You see I signed Clarke’s name to that certificate. I had to. If Clarke had simply traced over the signature it would have authenticated it. If he’d lived, it wouldn’t have made any difference one way or the other because he knew and approved what I had done. But with Clarke dead, I find myself between the devil and the deep sea. They could call that forgery, you see — an attempt on my part to get a quarter of a million dollars’ worth of stock for myself by forging the name of a dead client.”

“And Moffgat suspects?”

“Yes. I think so... Moffgat is only fishing around so far. He made a tentative pass at it by trying to threaten me. I won’t try to hold the stock, of course, yet I don’t dare to surrender the certificate.”

“What did you do?”

“Stopped him in his tracks by calling him cold.”

“Chief, do be careful.”

He grinned. “It’s too late for that — I never liked being careful, anyway.”

It was four o’clock in the afternoon when Drake’s agency reported. Banning Clarke owned some claims up in the Walker Pass country. They were known as the Sky High Group, and were under option to the Come-Back Mining Syndicate. The option would expire at midnight. Apparently Salty Bowers had gone up to these claims. Dr. Kenward and Velma Starler had accompanied him, the physician seeking some place where he could have a change from hospital background, and complete quiet.

Mason made note of the exact location of Banning Clarke’s Sky High claims, then smiled at Della Street. “Della, haven’t we a couple of sleeping bags stored with the janitor?”

She nodded. “Ones we used on that camping trip last fall. I’m not too certain about the air mattresses.”

“We’ll take a chance,” Mason said. “Tell the janitor to drag them out. Go out to your apartment and put on some clothes that will stand the gaff. Take along a portable typewriter, a brief case with some stationery and carbon paper, see that your fountain pen is filled, and be sure to bring a shorthand notebook.”

“Where,” she asked, “are we going?”

Mason’s smile became a broad grin. “Prospecting — for a lost murderer — and dodging a forgery charge.”

Chapter 17

For miles now, the dirt road had wound and twisted. The weird Joshua palms standing as silhouetted sentries gave somehow the impression of warning travelers back with outstretched arms. An occasional kangaroo rat scurried across the white ribbon of roadway. Clumps of prickly pear furnished spine-covered sanctuary for frightened rabbits. Cholla cacti, catching the headlights, seemed shrouded with a delicate transparency of silken fringe, the most deceptively deadly cactus on the desert. An occasional barrel cactus, standing straight and chunky, served as a reminder of stories of prospectors who, trapped in the desert without water, had chopped off the top of the big cactus, scooped out the pithy interior, waited for the watery sap to collect, and so assuaged the pangs of thirst.

Della Street sat with the little penciled map she had made spread across her knees. She held her small flashlight shielded by her cupped hand so that it would not interfere with Mason's driving. Frequently now, she looked at the speedometer.

"Two-tenths of a mile and the road turns off," she said.

Mason slowed the car, searched the left-hand side of the road for the turnoff, finally found it, little more than two faint ruts in the desert.

Della Street snapped off the flashlight, folded the map and put it back in her purse. "It's three and six-tenths miles from here. We just stay on this road."

The road climbed to an elevated plateau which rimmed the lower desert.

"I caught a flicker of light," Della said.

"Car coming?"

"It was rather reddish. Now, there it is off to the right. It's a campfire."

The road twisted around a jutting promontory in an abrupt turn and debouched on a little shelf where a blob of red light resolved itself into a small campfire.

"See anyone?" Mason asked.

"Not a soul," she said.

Mason slowed the car to a stop at a place where wheel tracks fanned out. The headlights showed a late-model sedan parked near Salty Bowers' old jalopy, the trailer in which the burros had been carried.

Mason shut off the motor, switched off the headlights.

There was complete silence, save for the little crackling noises which emanated from under the hood of his car as the motor started

cooling off — noises which, under ordinary circumstances, would have been inaudible, but in the desert silence sounded like a distant naval bombardment.

Against this background of silence, the deserted campfire seemed utterly incongruous, an attempt at artificial cheer that was as out of place as a wisecrack at an execution.

“Br-r-r-r!” Della Street said. “I feel all creepy.”

Mason opened the door of the car.

A voice from the darkness some fifteen feet away from them said in a slow drawl, “Oh! It’s you!” Then Salty Bowers raised his voice. “All right, folks, it’s the lawyer.”

Almost immediately the camp bustled into activity. But not until Dr. Kenward, hobbling along on crutches, came out of the darkness which rimmed the circle of illumination around the campfire, and Velma Starler’s trim figure silhouetted itself against the orange-red glow, did Salty Bowers emerge from the blackness which marked the location of a clump of desert juniper.

“Can’t be too careful,” he explained, “not with what’s been going on. People around a campfire are the best targets in the world. Saw your car coming and decided we’d just better be on the safe side. What’s the matter, something new happen?”

“Nothing new. We’re hiding out for a while. Have you got room for a couple more campers?”

Salty grinned, swept his arm in a wide sweep. “All the room in the world. Come on over to the fire. I’ll brew a cup of tea.”

“We’ve got the car loaded with camp equipment,” Mason explained.

“Take it out later,” Salty said. “Come on over and sit a while.”

The three of them moved over to the campfire. Mason and Della shook hands with Dr. Kenward and the nurse, then settled down around the little blaze. Salty produced a fire-blackened graniteware coffee pot, poured water in it from a canteen, put it over the flames, said, “I use this one only for tea. Have another one for coffee. — Guess you understand, Mr. Mason, I warn’t running away from anything; but around the city, people just don’t seem to understand the feeling a man’s got for a partner. Banning’s death busted me all up. Folks wanted to *talk* about it — just talk — talk — talk. All of a sudden I got so I was hungry for the desert just like a man gets when he’s been wanting something and don’t know exactly what it is — and then the smell of frying bacon and coffee happens to hit him and he knows he’s just plain damned hungry.”

“And I,” Dr. Kenward explained, “decided that I needed to really rest. I think Velma was the go-between who fixed it up with Salty. I’m certainly indebted to him for taking me along.”

"This is Banning Clarke's claim?" Mason asked.

"It is now," Salty said; then, looking at his watch, amended, "It will be at midnight. That's when the option expires."

"Of course," Mason pointed out, "they *could* exercise that option between now and midnight."

"They could," Salty observed dryly.

Dr. Kenward said abruptly, "I'm going to say something about that murder, and then, if it's all the same to you, I think it would be a fine idea to quit talking about it."

"That," Salty announced with feeling, "suits me."

"What was it you wanted to say?" Mason asked.

Dr. Kenward said, "While the police haven't taken me into their confidence, I assume it's their theory someone tried to shoot me under the mistaken impression that I was Banning Clarke."

"So I gather," Mason said. "But the police don't exactly confide in me, either."

"Of course, it's an obvious conclusion. I had wandered out to the place where Banning Clarke would have been camped if he hadn't pulled out. I was visible in the moonlight only as a sleeping figure swathed in blankets. Quite obviously any person who didn't know that Clarke had left for the desert, and who wanted to kill him, would have assumed that I was Clarke."

Mason nodded.

"But," Dr. Kenward went on, "I have been wondering whether such was actually the case."

"You mean someone tried to kill you *knowing who you were*?"

"It's a possibility."

"And the motive?" Mason asked.

Dr. Kenward hesitated. "Come on," Mason prompted. "There could be only one motive — certain information that you possess. What is it?"

"I hadn't intended to go *quite* that far when I started talking about it," Dr. Kenward said.

"Well, we've gone that far now," Mason told him. "I should say, Doctor, that it was some bit of medical information you had uncovered — something about the poisoning, perhaps. And I think it's only fair to all concerned, including yourself, that you should tell us."

Dr. Kenward laughed. "You have all but deduced what it is. Purely as a matter of routine, I saved some of the stomach contents on the occasion of that first poisoning. That, you will remember, was the occasion when we found arsenic in the private saltcellar used only by the Bradissons."

"And what," Mason asked, "did you find?"

"A report on the analysis of the stomach content," Dr. Kenward

said, "reached me just before I left town. It was, of course, given to me over the telephone; but the analysis shows that there was no trace of arsenic."

"Then what," Mason asked, "induced the symptoms?"

"Apparently, ipecac."

"And what," Mason pressed, "would be the object of taking ipecac?"

"To induce certain symptoms of arsenic poisoning."

"And what would be the object of inducing those symptoms, Doctor?"

Dr. Kenward said dryly, "That is a question, Mr. Mason, which comes within *your* department. I am reporting only the medical facts."

"But how about the metallic taste in the throat, the cramps, the general soreness?"

"I have questioned Velma about that very carefully," he said. "As nearly as she can recollect now, she *may* have been the one to suggest those symptoms. I have asked her particularly whether, when she first began to suspect the possibility of arsenic poisoning, she didn't ask the patients if they were suffering from cramps, general abdominal pain, a metallic burning sensation in the back of the mouth, and cramps in the legs. She can't remember now whether she asked that question of the patients, or whether they told her they were experiencing such symptoms."

"Does it make a great deal of difference?" Mason asked.

"A very great deal. Whenever a patient becomes violently ill, there is usually a certain element of depression, quite frequently a receptivity to suggestion, occasionally definite symptoms of hysteria. Under those circumstances a person normally experiencing a part of the symptoms which accompany a certain disease, and learning of other symptoms which are supposed to go hand in hand, will immediately develop those other symptoms."

"You're certain it was arsenic in the saltcellar?" Mason asked.

"There can be no doubt of that. The analysis shows it."

"Then *why* was the arsenic placed in the saltcellar?"

"That also is a question which is in your department rather than mine. But there are obviously two alternatives. One is that the arsenic was put in the saltcellar by someone who knew that the Bradissons were suffering from a poisoning, the symptoms of which resembled arsenic poisoning, and for some reason wanted to make it appear arsenic poisoning had been attempted."

"And the other alternative?" Mason asked.

"Is that someone actually tried to poison the Bradissons, that the poison was intended to take effect some time during the next day when the Bradissons would use the saltcellar, that through some

peculiar coincidence, and from an undisclosed source, the Bradissons ingested a sufficient quantity of ipecac to produce violent illness."

Mason said, "I will ask you this, Doctor. Have you considered the possibility that the ipecac was taken by the Bradissons themselves with the deliberate intention of simulating the symptoms of arsenic poisoning?"

"Purely as a man of science trying to explore all possibilities which would account for all of the symptoms I encountered, I *have* taken that into consideration."

"Is there any evidence to support it?"

"None."

"It is a logical explanation?"

"There is no evidence against it."

"And you feel someone tried to murder you because you had this information?"

"It is a possibility."

They were silent for nearly a minute, then Mason said, "I want to think that over. In the meantime, I'm going to get my sleeping bag spread out."

Mason walked over to the car, pulled out the sleeping bags, fitted the power pump to the motor, inflated the air mattresses, and looked up to find Salty Bowers at his side.

"Have you," Mason asked, "staked out any particular sleeping quarters?"

"We've got a tent," Salty said. "The girls can use it for a dressing-room. They won't want to sleep in it. It's better to sleep out under the stars."

"Then let's put Miss Street's sleeping bag over by the tent," Mason said. "Where are you sleeping?"

Salty lowered his voice. "I'm not too easy in my mind about what's been going on. I've pulled my blankets down the trail a piece where I can sort of keep watch in case anybody should come pussyfooting along. — You pick up that end of the sleeping bag, I'll pick up this end and we'll carry it over. And when we get done, the tea will be just about ready to drink."

When the sleeping bags had been placed in position and the duffel bags brought out of Mason's car, the little group gathered once more around the fire. Salty put an armful of sagebrush on the fire, which promptly crackled into brilliance, a circle of illumination chasing back the encroaching shadows.

Salty poured tea, said, "The air's different out here somehow."

"It most certainly is," Mason said. "Dry and clear."

"A few months ago I developed a sinus condition," Dr. Kenward said. "It's clearing up out here with great rapidity. I am most

encouraged.”

“How’s the wound?” Mason asked.

“Nothing serious at all. I have to watch for certain complications and nip them in the bud if they arise. I naturally have to be quiet. Believe it or not, this is a great boon to me. It’s an enforced vacation, but a very welcome one.”

“What’s Nell Sims doing?” Mason asked. “Staying in the house?”

“Staying in the house nothing,” Salty said. “She headed back to Mojave, says she’s going to open up her old restaurant. I guess,” he added wistfully, “the desert has a way of reclaiming its own.”

“It’s marvelous out here,” Della said.

“Lots of people hate the desert,” Salty explained. “That’s because they’re really afraid of it. They’re afraid of being left alone with themselves. There’s lots of people you could put down in the middle of the desert, go away and leave ’em for a week, and come back and find them completely crazy. I’ve seen it happen. Man sprained his ankle once, couldn’t travel. The party he was with had to go right on, but they left him with lots of water and food, plenty of matches, lots of wood. All he had to do was to just keep quiet for three or four days until he got so he could travel. He showed up in civilization just about half crazy. His ankle was all inflamed, said he’d rather have lost the whole leg than to have stayed on in that desert for another ten minutes.”

“I think it’s beautiful,” Velma Starler said.

“Sure it’s beautiful,” Salty agreed. “People get scared of it because out here they’re alone with their Maker. Some people can’t stand that. — How about some more tea?”

The sagebrush finished its preliminary crackling, got down to a steady burning.

“How,” Mason asked, “do you go about prospecting? Do you just wander around and look the desert over?”

“Gosh, no. You have to know a little something about how the ground was formed. You’ve got to figure out your formations, and then you’ve got to know what to look for. Lots of prospectors have picked up rock that would have made them rich, and thrown it away. — Here, let me show you something.”

Salty put down his teacup, got up and walked over to the pickup. He rummaged around for a few moments, then produced a boxlike affair.

“What’s that?” Mason asked.

“Black light. Ever seen it work?”

“I’ve seen it used in connection with the detection of forgeries.”

“If you ain’t seen it in the desert, you just ain’t seen anything. We’ve got to have it where it’s dark. Come on, walk around behind

this rock outcropping and I'll show you."

"I'll plead my crippled condition and stay here," Dr. Kenward said. "I don't want too much getting up and down."

They moved around behind the big rock outcropping. Here the light of the fire was shut out, and the stars, blazing with steady brilliance, seemed interested spectators regarding with a steady scrutiny the vague figures that moved over the desert.

Salty noticed them looking at the stars. "They say stars twinkle when air is mixed up with dust and stuff, and different air currents make 'em twinkle. I don't know anything about it. Maybe some of you folks do. All I know is that they don't twinkle out here."

Salty clicked a switch. A low humming sound came from the interior of the machine.

"Sort of induction coil," Salty explained. "Steps the current up from six volts to a hundred and fifteen. There's a two-watt bulb in here. It's on now."

The darkness assumed a peculiar color. It was hardly an illumination, was as though the darkness had turned a deep, almost black, violet.

"Now," Salty said, "I'll turn this beam of invisible light over toward this rock outcropping and you see what happens."

He swung toward the outcropping, turning the boxlike arrangement with his body as he pivoted.

Almost immediately it seemed that a thousand different colored lights had been turned on in the rocky outcropping. Some of the lights were blue, some a yellowish green, some a bright green. The lights varied in size from small pin points to great blobs of illumination the size of a baseball.

Della Street caught her breath. Velma Starler exclaimed out loud. Mason was silent, fascinated by the spectacle.

"What is it?" Della Street asked.

"I don't know too much about it. They call it fluorescent light," Salty said. "We use it in prospecting. You can tell different minerals by the different colors. I'll admit that I sort of fixed up the face of that rock outcropping a little bit, putting in some float I picked up in other parts of the desert that didn't rightly belong there.

"You were asking me about prospecting. We do a lot of it at night now. Lug around one of these outfits and spot minerals with it. Rocks that you'd pass over by day without a second glance will show you they've got valuable mineral in 'em when you turn this black light on 'em. — Well, let's go back to the fire. I don't want the Doc to think we ran away and left him. I just wanted to show you."

Salty switched off the mechanism which made the black light.

"Well," Dr. Kenward asked as they returned to the campfire, "how

about it? Did it work?"

"Wonderfully," Mason said.

"It was the most awe-inspiring, the most beautiful sight I've ever seen," Velma Starler said enthusiastically. "Do you know how it works?"

"Generally. A bulb filled with argon and having a very low current consumption, usually about a two-watt-current rating, emits ultraviolet light. Our eyes aren't adjusted so we can see this light, but when it impinges upon various minerals, the wave length is changed back to that of visible light. The result is that these minerals have the appearance of actually emitting rays of light of various colors as independent sources of illumination."

"You've used those machines?" Mason asked him.

"I— Ouch! A twinge of pain in that leg. It's all right, Velma... nothing to be done."

"More tea here," Salty announced, and filled the teacups.

The sagebrush on the fire sputtered into a last flicker of flame. There was a lull in the conversation and, in that momentary lull, the silence of the desert made itself so apparent that it seemed to dominate the senses — a silence so intense that the lull in the conversation became a blanket of silence.

The last wavering flame flickered bravely, then vanished, leaving only a bed of glowing coals. Almost instantly the circle of darkness, which had been waiting just outside the campfire, moved in with a rush. The stars overhead brightened into added brilliance. A vagrant breeze coming down from off the higher ridges behind the camp fanned the coals into deep red for a moment. Over all, the brooding silence of the desert cast its spell.

Wordlessly, Salty *got* up, walked out into the darkness. Long experience in moving around at night without artificial illumination had made him as sure of himself as a blind man moving about through familiar surroundings.

"Well, guess I'll be turning in. Good night."

Dr. Kenward tried to get to his feet without asking Velma Starler for assistance, but she was at his side helping him up within less than a second. "Why didn't you tell me you wanted to get up?" she asked chidingly.

"I don't want to be so dependent."

"You've got to get over that some time. You have to depend on other people some. Are you going to bed?"

"I think so. If you'll help me with my shoes... That's fine! I don't want to bend that leg... Thanks."

Mason and Della Street sat by the dying fire, sharing the desert silence, looking into the red circle of coals.

Behind them the range of high mountains was a black silhouette against the western stars. Ahead and to the east the country dropped sharply into mysterious nebulous darkness which they knew held the level expanse of desert. Directly in front of them, the little circle of glowing coals gradually faded into a mere pool of pastel color which the night winds no longer had the power to fan into brilliance.

Mason's hand moved over, found Della Street's hand, took possession of it and held it in quiet understanding.

In the east, a faint band of nebulous illumination as vague and indistinct as the first flickers of Northern Lights paled the brilliance of the stars. Then, after a few minutes, the eastern range of mountains far out on the other side of the desert showed as a threadlike, saw-toothed strip outlined against a yellow illumination. This illumination grew in intensity until the slightly lopsided moon rose majestically to pour light over the surface far beneath them, bringing out ridges which were tinged with gold above pools of black shadow, pools that kept shrinking.

For more than two hours Mason and Della Street sat there watching the ever-changing spectacle, surrounded by the vast spell of silence.

Chapter 18

Mason was awakened from deep slumber by the bugling of a burro. Almost immediately the other burro joined in the chorus, and Mason was grinning even as he opened his eyes.

The dawn was crisp and cool. One or two of the bright stars were still visible. There was not enough moisture in the sky to form even the faintest wisp of cloud, nor was there any trace of dew on the outside of the sleeping bag. The distant mountain range to the east was a narrow sawblade of black, outlined against a greenish blue illumination that tapered off into darkness. It was as yet too early to distinguish colors, but the sleeping camp showed objects in gray outlines.

Mason struggled to a sitting position and, as his back and shoulders emerged from the sleeping bag, the body warmth which the down covers had wrapped around him was whisked away in the cold still air, and Mason promptly shot back down into the warm covers.

The burros had seen him move, and, walking with dainty, careful feet, moved over to his sleeping bag. Mason felt a silky soft nose nuzzling around his ear. Then, after a moment, lips nibbled at his hair.

The lawyer laughed and struggled out of the sleeping bag and into his clothes. Apparently the braying of the burros had not aroused any of the other sleepers. The bags were motionless mounds in the increasing light of early dawn.

Mason kept feeling colder as he dressed. There was no breath of air stirring, but the crisp mountain air was definitely cold. He looked around for feed for the burros and could find none, nor did the animals seem to expect any. Apparently they had only wanted human companionship, desired only to see the camp stirred into life. Once Mason started moving around, the burros sagged into a posture of contentment, ears drooping forward, heads lowered.

Mason broke up dry sagebrush, kindled it with a match, soon had a fire going. He was looking around for supplies when Salty Bowers, a businesslike six-shooter strapped to his hip, came swinging out from behind the rock outcropping and into the open.

Salty nodded to Mason, apparently avoiding conversation that would waken the other sleepers. He moved over to the burros, rubbed his hand along their necks and ears, poured ice-cold water from a canteen into a basin, washed, then put coffee on the fire. As Mason washed, the bracing water stung glowing circulation into his face and hands.

“Cold up here,” he said.

“Nights are cold,” Salty agreed. “You’re way up, up here. Wait

until the sun rises and you won't be bothered none with cold."

Mason helped with the cooking, noticing that Della Street's sleeping bag became convulsed with motion as she did most of her dressing under cover of the bag. A few moments later she joined him at the fire.

"Sleep?" Mason asked.

"Sleep!" she exclaimed. "The most marvelous sleep I've ever had in my life. Usually when I sleep so heavily, I wake up feeling drugged. Now my lungs feel all washed out and— When do we eat?"

"Pretty soon," Salty said.

The east became a dazzling sheet of vivid orange. The edges of the silhouetted mountains seemed coated with liquid gold. The first small segment of sun put in a dazzling appearance. The desert began taking on pastel shades of color. Mason, seeing the need for more firewood, broke up brittle, dry sage and brought it in to where Salty was slicing bacon with a razor-keen knife.

The sun swung clear of the mountains, hung poised for a few moments as though gathering strength, and then sent rays of golden warmth flooding the camp. For the next quarter hour, Mason was too busy assisting in the preparations to pay too much attention to his surroundings. Then suddenly he realized that not only had he ceased being cold, but that it was getting hot.

The aroma of coffee mingled with the smoky tang of bacon. Velma Starler and Dr. Kenward joined the group around the fire. Soon they were eating golden brown hot cakes swimming with melted butter, rich with syrup, with strips of meaty bacon to add just the right tang of smoky salt. The coffee was a clear deep brown with plenty of full-bodied flavor.

"What's the secret?" Velma Starler asked, laughing. "Doesn't rationing bother you?"

Salty grinned. "Banning Clarke laid in a cache of canned goods up here a while back."

"Didn't he declare them?" Mason asked.

"Sure he declared them. They'll be tearing half the coupons out of his book from now until the middle of nineteen-seventy-six. He liked his grub, and he hated to carry too much stuff in by burro-back, so he trucked stuff out part way and got packers to bring it in. You'd be surprised how long canned butter keeps when it's buried in a cool place. Same with vacuum-packed coffee. — Rationing's all right for people in the city," Salty went on with some feeling, "but you take a prospector that has to go in and load up with enough provisions to last him for months, and he just can't get by on ration stuff. He has to use all canned goods and dried foods. — Oh well, *we're* all right, thanks to the stuff we got cached around here. You can eat all you

want an' stay as long as you like and it won't hurt a bit."

"Thanks for your hospitality, Salty, but we're heading toward Mojave right after breakfast."

Della glanced quickly at the lawyer, fighting surprise back from her eyes.

"Better look up Nell Sims when you get there," Salty said.

"We intend to."

"Maybe she'll have her pies going by today. She said she would."

"Suppose Pete went with her?"

Salty's lips clamped into a tight line. "I wouldn't know."

"You don't care much about Pete?"

"He's all right."

Mason grinned. "Well, I'll go take a look at Mojave."

"You don't know when — That is — the funeral?"

"No. They won't release the body for a while, Salty. Not until tomorrow anyway."

Salty suddenly thrust out his hand. "Thanks," he said.

They said good-by to the others, loaded their car and started down the dusty, winding road, Della Street at the wheel.

"Thought you planned to stay for a day or two," Della said.

"I did," Mason admitted. "I wasn't exactly running away, but I didn't want to be available for questioning until the situation had clarified itself somewhat. If I don't produce that stock certificate, I'm in bad. If I do, it becomes apparent that the endorsement is, as matters now stand, a forgery. Then there's one other thing that bothers me. The minute Mrs. Bradisson finds that other will has disappeared she'll know who has it. You see she *knows* I couldn't have gone in that room and fallen asleep, because she left it only a relatively short time before I was discovered in there at the desk."

"What will she do when she finds out, Chief?"

"I don't know. Her position will then be untenable, so she may decide to beat me to the punch. All in all, I thought it would be better to keep out of circulation for a while. But that information about the ippecac — well, if they start anything, we can fight back."

"At that you're in hot water again," she observed after a few minutes during which she silently concentrated on driving the car.

"It's hot all right," Mason admitted, "and it keeps getting hotter. It won't be long until it starts boiling."

"Then what?"

"Then I'll become even more hard-boiled."

"For one like that, you deserve to be conversationally ostracized," she proclaimed. "I'm going to put you in verbal quarantine."

"It's really justified," he admitted, letting his head drop back to the cushions, closing his eyes. "I really *should* be shot."

Mason dozed while the dusty miles slipped behind. Then the dirt road joined a ribbon of paved highway and the car purred smoothly toward Mojave, topped a little rise, and the town of Mojave sprawled out across the face of the desert as listless, when seen from this distance, and as sun-bleached as a dried bone.

"Well," Della Street said, easing the pressure on the foot throttle, "here we are. Where do we go?"

Mason, still with his eyes closed, said, "Nell Sims' restaurant."

"Think we can find it all right?"

Mason chuckled. "Her return should be quite an event in the history of Mojave. Doubtless there will be some manifestation. Her individuality is too strong to be swallowed without a trace in a town of this size."

The road swung along for a short distance parallel to the railroad track. Della Street said, "Looks as though it had been snowing."

Mason opened his eyes. Pieces of paper were plastered up against every clump of greasewood that dotted the face of the desert.

"Railroad track over here," Mason said with a gesture, "and the winds come from that direction, and you've never really seen the wind blow until you've been in Mojave. Trains always spew out pieces of paper, and along here the winds blow them against the little greasewood bushes so hard that they stick. The accumulation of years along here. Down here a way, a man had a hat farm."

"A hat farm?" Della asked.

"That's right. It gets hot in the desert and people stick their heads out of the train windows. A certain percentage of hats blow off, and the wind rolls them along the ground like tumbleweeds until they fetch up against the greasewood on this fellow's little homestead. His neighbors plowed up the ground on their homesteads and tried to grow things. The country starved them out. This man left all the natural brush in place and picked up enough hats in the course of a year to keep him in grub."

Della Street laughed.

"No kidding," Mason told her; "it's a fact. Ask some of the people around here about the hat farm."

"Honest injun?"

"Honest injun. You ask them."

The road went down a little dip, made a slight curve and entered Mojave. At closer range the little desert metropolis presented more signs of external activity.

"There was a time," Mason said, "when the only people who lived here were those who didn't have carfare enough or gumption enough to get out of town. This was too civilized to have the real advantages of the desert, and too much of the desert to have the advantages of

civilization. Now, with air-conditioning and electric refrigeration, the place is quite livable, and you can see the difference in the whole appearance of the city. — I guess this is the place we want, Della, dead ahead. See the sign?”

A sign made of bunting had been rigged up and hung out across the sidewalk. It proclaimed in vivid red letters at least three feet high, “*NELL’S BACK!*”

Della Street eased the car to a stop. Mason held the car door open while she slid out from under the steering wheel, across the seat, and, with a flash of trim legs, stood on the sidewalk beside him.

“Any particular line we use?” Della asked.

“No. We just barge in and start talking.”

Mason held the restaurant door open for her. As they entered the room, after the glare of the desert, their sun-tortured eyes took a second or two to adjust themselves so they could see into the shadows. One thing, however, which was clearly visible as soon as they entered the room was a long thin piece of bunting stretched over the mirror behind the lunch counter. On it was painted in big letters: “BECAUSE I RUN A BETTER RESTAURANT, THE WORLD HAS BEAT A MOUSE TRAP TO MY DOORS.”

“This,” Mason announced, “is *undoubtedly* the place.”

From the dark coolness near the back of the room, Nell Sims exclaimed, “Well, for the land sakes! Now, what on earth are *you* two doing here?”

“Just looking for a cup of coffee and a piece of pie,” Mason said, grinning and walking across to shake hands. “How are you?”

“I’m fine. Well, you folks certainly *do* get around.”

“Don’t we?” Della said laughing.

“It’s just a little early for me to get my shelves stocked with pastry,” Nell Sims apologized, “but I’ve got some pies coming out of the oven in just a minute now. How’d you like a piece of hot apple pie with a couple of scoops of ice cream on top of it and a nice big slab of cheese on the side of the plate?”

“Can you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Serve pie, cheese, and ice cream at one time?”

“I ain’t supposed to, but I can. Out in these parts Hospitality can’t read — at least, any of these new-fangled government regulations. Sit right down and I’ll have those pies out of the oven in just a minute or two. You’ll like ’em. I put in plenty of sugar. Never did care for desserts that were just half sweet. I put in lots of butter and sugar and cinnamon. May not be able to bake so many pies, but those I do bake certainly taste like something.”

“Anything new around here?” Mason asked casually, as he slid up

to the counter.

"Lots of excitement in town over the new strike. If you ask me, there's *something* awfully fishy about it."

"What?" Mason asked.

"That prospector," she said, and stopped.

"The man who located the mine?"

"The man who *says* he located the mine."

"What's wrong with him?" Mason asked.

"He's a tenderfoot. If he's a prospector, I'm a diplomat. He's certainly got the gold, though. Showing it around everywhere."

"What's he doing?" Mason asked.

"Drinking mostly."

"Where?"

"Just any place around town where he can find a parking place and a bottle. That cattleman is with him, and they're doing the craziest things."

"Where," Mason asked, "is your husband?"

"Haven't seen him since I landed. When they going to have the funeral, do you folks know?"

"I don't think anyone does. There's a lot of red tape in connection with post-mortems and things of that sort."

"A mighty good man," Nell Sims said. "It's a crying shame men like him have to go. He was just like a brother to me. Leaves me all broken up. Don't s'pose they've found out who did it yet... Land sakes! I'm almost forgetting about my pies."

She dashed back into the kitchen. They heard an oven door open and, a moment later, the delicious aroma of freshly baked pie warmed their nostrils.

The door opened. Two men entered the restaurant. Della Street, looking back at the door, closed her fingers on Mason's forearm. "It's Paul Drake and Harvey Brady," she said in a whisper.

"Hi!" Paul Drake exclaimed in the loud voice of a man who has been drinking and feels that his thoughts become increasingly important as they are expressed in a louder voice.

Mason's back was rigid.

"Madam," Paul Drake said, a slightly thickened tongue interfering a little with his grandiloquent manner, "I have been advised that the civic life of this c'munity has turned over a new page, with the auspicious advent of your return to the scenes of your earlier triumphants. In other words, Madam, to express myself more directly, they say you make damn good pie."

Harvey Brady said, "Unless my nose is mistaken, the pies are just about ready to come out of the oven."

Mason slowly turned.

Brady regarded him with the casual interest a man bestows upon a total stranger.

Paul Drake lurched forward, peered up at Mason with the intense scrutiny of someone who is having some difficulty focusing his eyes. "Hello, stranger," he said. "Let me introduce myself. My name's Drake. I'm half owner in the richest bonanza ever discovered in the whole mining history of the West. I'm happy. You, my boy, look hungry. You look thirsty. You look dissatisfied. You look unhappy. In short, my lad, you look like a Republican on an appropriations committee. There's nothing I can do here in the form of liquid refreshment to alleviate your deplorable condition, but I *can* show you the true hospitality of the West by buying you a piece of pie."

"His pie is already spoken for," Nell Sims said.

Drake nodded owlishly. "How many pieces of pie?" he asked.

"One," Mrs. Sims said.

"That's fine. I'll buy him the second piece. The first piece he has on himself. The second piece he has on me."

Drake turned to Harvey Brady. "Come on, partner. Sit up to the counter. Let's have pie. What do we care for the various vicis-s-s... Whoa! Guess I'd better back up and take another try at that one." He took in a deep breath. "What do we care for the various vicis — viciss — ssitudes of life when we have pie? Madam, we shall have pie, or as you would doubtless express it, eat — drink — and be merry, for tomorrow we pie."

Nell Sims said, "That isn't the right quotation."

"What *is*?" Drake asked belligerently.

"Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow roll on their dreary course."

Drake put his head in his hands and thought that over.

"You're right," he agreed at length.

Mrs. Sims said, "I've just taken the pies out of the oven. Just a minute and I'll bring them in."

She retired to the kitchen.

Paul Drake leaned forward and said in a confidential voice that was almost a whisper, "Look, Perry, let's make some dough on the side. I've met a *real* prospector who's working some property he thinks doesn't amount to much. There are some black pebbles that constantly get in his sluices. Perry, those pebbles are gold nuggets once you scrape off the black. The poor chap doesn't realize this. I wouldn't outsmart him on the whole claim, but I can get a half interest in it."

Mason drew back from the detective's breath. "Paul, you've been drinking."

"Of course I've been drinking," Drake said truculently. "Why the hell shouldn't I be drinking? How can I act the part of a drunk without

drinking — at least in this town where people watch every move you make. Hell's bells! I'm *famous!*"

Nell Sims appeared with the pie, served Della Street and Mason, then cut off smaller pieces for Brady and Drake.

The cattleman gave Mason's arm a surreptitious reassuring squeeze, then settled down at the table next to Drake.

Drake turned once more to Mason, regarded him with the alcoholic persistence of a drunk who has been rebuffed and has made up his mind he isn't going to take it. "Another thing," Drake said, "is that... Say, how's it happen *he* gets ice cream on *his* pie, and *we* don't get ice cream on *our* pie?"

"That's government regulations," Nell Sims said; "leastwise I think it is. That's what they told me when I took over the restaurant."

"How about him?" Drake demanded, pointing his finger at Perry Mason.

Nell Sims never batted an eyelash. "He has an A-i-A priority rating from the local war board."

Drake regarded Mason with widened eyes. "I'll be a son-of-a-gun!" he exclaimed.

Mason, watching his opportunity, said in a low voice, "Want to see you alone as soon as we can get out of here, Paul."

Brady, keeping his voice equally low, said, "So does all the rest of Mojave, Perry. Stick your head out of the door and you'll see ten or fifteen people sort of casually hanging around the sidewalk. The point is that wherever we go those same ten or fifteen people—"

He broke off as the screen door banged open. A frightened little whisper of a man scuttled through the doorway and made for the kitchen.

"Hey, Pete!" Paul Drake yelled, jumping to his feet, his manner enthusiastically cordial. "Come on over here. Right over here, Pete old boy!"

Pete Sims either didn't hear him or paid no attention. "Nell!" he half screamed. "Nell, you've got to see me through this! You—!"

Once more the door banged open. Sheriff Gregory's form bulked large against the eye-dazzling glare which beat down on the town's single main street.

"Hey, you!" he yelled. "Come back here. What the hell did you run for? You're under arrest."

Drake gave Mason a woebegone look. "Oh, my gosh," he said dolefully. "*That's* the guy who was going to sell me a half interest in the mining claim."

Chapter 19

Sheriff Gregory pushed his way toward the counter, his face hard lines of determination.

Pete skidded around the counter to stand beside his wife. His frightened little eyes regarded the sheriff apprehensively.

Nell Sims said, "Pete, *what* have you been up to now?"

Behind the officer, venturing somewhat tentatively through the doorway, appeared Mrs. Bradisson and her son.

Pete Sims caught sight of Mason and, his voice chattering with fright, said, "There's my lawyer. I demand an opportunity to talk with my lawyer. You can't do anything to me until I've seen a lawyer."

"Pete," Nell Sims said sternly, "you tell me what you've been up to. Come on now, make a clean breast of it."

Gregory said, "Ask him to tell you what he was doing with twelve ounces of arsenic."

"*Arsenic!*" Nell exclaimed.

"That's right. What were you doing with it, Pete?"

"I didn't have it, I tell you."

"Don't be silly. We've found where you bought it. The druggist identifies your photograph."

"It's all a mistake, I tell you."

"It's a mistake as far as you're concerned all right."

"I'm going to talk with a lawyer."

"Pete Sims, did you put poison in that sugar? Why, if I thought you'd done that, I'd — I'd — I'd kill you with my bare hands."

"I didn't, Nell. Honest I didn't. I got this poison for something else."

"What did you want with it?"

"I can't tell you."

"Where is that poison?" Nell demanded.

"You've got it."

"I have?"

"Yes."

"You're crazy!"

"Don't you remember that paper bag I gave to you and told you to save?"

"You mean that stuff that — Good Heavens! I thought it was some stuff for mining. That's what you said it was. You didn't *tell* me it was poison."

"I told you to keep it where no one could possibly touch it," Sims said.

"Why you... you..."

"Come on," Sheriff Gregory said; "what did you buy it for?"

"I—I don't know."

Mason turned to Nell Sims. "Where did you put it?" he asked.

Her face told its own story of agonized dismay.

"Near the sugar?" Mason asked.

She nodded, too overcome for words.

"And," Mason went on gently, "could you, by mistake, have reached into this bag instead of the sugar bag, and—"

"I couldn't," she said, "but Dorina could have. You see, with the rationing of sugar, the way things are nowadays — well, I told Dorina to use her stamps and get a bag of sugar. She handed it to me. After she'd gone, I opened the bag and dumped it into the big sack with the other sugar; but this bag Pete had given me was in there on the shelf, and she might have seen it and thought it was the bag of sugar she'd bought. And then, if she thought the sugar bowl needed filling... Pete, why didn't you tell me that was poison?"

"I told you not to touch it," Pete said.

"Don't you see what you've done? If Dorina got into that bag by mistake and filled up the sugar bowl, you've been the one that poisoned Banning Clarke."

"I didn't poison him. I tell you I didn't have anything to do with it. I just handed you this bag."

"Why did you buy that arsenic in the first place?" Sheriff Gregory asked.

"I wanted to do some experiments in mining, and I had to have some arsenic to do them with."

"Then why didn't you use it?"

"Well, I just never got around to doing those experiments."

There was a moment's silence.

Mrs. Bradisson said, "But while that might account for the fact that arsenic was mixed in the sugar, Sheriff, it would hardly account for the fact that arsenic had been mixed in with the salt the night my son and I were poisoned."

"That's right," the sheriff agreed. "I hadn't thought of that. That shows it was deliberate, not an accident."

"Just a moment," Mason interposed smoothly. "I hadn't intended to spring this at this time, but under the circumstances and since you seem to be narrowing the circle down, Sheriff, I'm going to tell you that Mrs. Bradisson wasn't suffering from arsenic poisoning."

"Nonsense," Mrs. Bradisson said. "I guess I know what the symptoms were, and Dr. Kenward said that's what it was, also the nurse."

"Nevertheless," Mason said, "you didn't have arsenic poisoning. You had certain symptoms and you perhaps simulated others, but your

nausea was induced by ipecac — probably deliberately induced.”

“Why, I never heard of any such thing. What do you mean by that?”

“I mean,” Mason said, “that Dr. Kenward told me he placed a portion of the stomach contents in a sealed glass bottle and delivered it to a laboratory for an examination and analysis. The report came back a few hours ago. There was no sign of arsenic, but there *were* traces of ipecac. The same situation is true of both yourself and your son.”

“Why, I never heard of such a thing,” she stormed.

“Now then,” Mason went on smoothly, “arsenic *might* have been administered accidentally, or with homicidal intent; but the strong probabilities are that the ipecac was taken deliberately. Now suppose you and your son tell us why you took ipecac, and then simulated the symptoms of arsenic poisoning. Why did you do it?”

“I never did any such thing,” Mrs. Bradisson said.

James Bradisson moved forward. “I think it’s about time for me to take a hand in this, Mason.”

“Go ahead,” Mason said. “Walk right in.”

Bradisson said in a low voice to Gregory, “I think you should find out why Mason is so deliberately pulling a red herring across the trail.”

“It’s no red herring,” Mason said. “I’m simply showing that the theory that the arsenic got into the sugar accidentally is quite tenable. The only thing that stands in the way of such a theory is that arsenic is supposed to have been in the saltcellar the night before.”

Mrs. Bradisson tilted her chin. She said with dignity, “I can tell you why Perry Mason has suddenly brought up all of this stuff about the ipecac.”

Sheriff Gregory looked at her expectantly.

“Because,” Mrs. Bradisson went on, “Perry Mason *stole* something from Banning Clarke’s study.”

“What’s that?” Gregory demanded. “Say that again.”

Mrs. Bradisson spoke, the words coming out in a rush. “I said that Perry Mason stole a document out of Banning Clarke’s desk, and I know what I’m talking about.”

“How do you know?” Gregory asked.

“I’ll tell you how. When I heard Banning Clarke was killed, I knew that there was something very dark and sinister behind it, and that someone would be almost certain to try to go through his things, and — if he had left a will — to tamper with it. So I went into his room, went through his roll-top desk, found a document that I considered very important evidence. I fastened it to the bottom of the drawer on the lower left-hand side of the desk with thumbtacks and

then put the drawer back.”

“Why did you do that?” Gregory asked ominously.

“So that anyone that came in and tried to tamper with his things wouldn’t be able to find that document and destroy it.”

“Why would anyone want to destroy it?”

“Because it purported to be a will in Banning Clarke’s handwriting. It wasn’t in his writing at all. It was a forgery. It left property to Perry Mason. And if you’ll use your head a little you’ll see some very sinister things have been happening. Perry Mason meets Banning Clarke only a few days ago. In that short time, Mason gets all of Banning Clarke’s stock, then Clarke leaves a will leaving property to Mason, and then Clarke dies. Rather a nice series of happenings — for Perry Mason — who is also named in the will as executor.”

Gregory turned toward Perry Mason, started to say something, changed his mind and whirled back to Mrs. Bradisson.

“And why do you think Perry Mason took the will?”

“Put two and two together. When I went down to Banning Clarke’s room I didn’t close the door. I simply went into the desk and found this forged will and hid it. Remember that Banning was my son-in-law. I felt toward him just as though he had been my own child.”

“And,” Mason asked, “you substituted a will in place of the one you took out of the desk?”

She smiled at him with exaggerated sweetness. “Yes, Mr. Mason, I did. And thank you very much for calling my attention to that fact, because it shows that you *were* watching me.”

“I was,” Mason admitted.

She turned triumphantly to the officer. “You see,” she said, “he was watching me. As soon as I left, he entered the room, found where I had left that forged will, and probably destroyed it. He knew by that time that I suspected the truth. I went back the next morning and the will had been removed. There were only the thumbtacks left in the bottom of the drawer — no will. And you’ll remember you found Mr. Mason sitting at the desk when you went in there to search. I believe he *said* he’d been asleep. Well, that was only about ten or fifteen minutes after I had left the room. Banning had left his *real* will in my custody. I put it in the desk.”

Gregory said ominously, “Mason, this is serious — damn serious. You yourself admit you took that will?”

“I admit nothing,” Mason said suavely. “I only asked Mrs. Bradisson a question. She took it as an admission.”

“So did I.”

Mason bowed. “That’s your privilege. I only said I watched.”

“Where’s that will?”

“What will?”

"The one Mrs. Bradisson has described."

"You'll have to ask her. She's the one who described it."

"You deny having it?"

"I haven't any such document as *she* described."

"It said something about a clue in a drawer in the desk," Mrs. Bradisson went on, "and there was nothing in there but a mosquito in a bottle."

Mason smiled at her. "I believe I was accused of dragging red herrings across the trail, Mrs. Bradisson, so I feel free to make the same accusation. Now, since you have tossed the hand grenade which was to have stamped the investigation in an entirely different direction, perhaps you'll be so good as to explain to the sheriff how it happens that you took ipecac in order to simulate the symptoms of arsenic poisoning twenty-four hours before Banning Clarke was given a fatal dose."

Sheriff Gregory seemed somewhat dazed as he turned his frown from Mason to Mrs. Bradisson.

James Bradisson interposed, "Look here, this is all news to me, but I don't like the way this is being handled. My mother is nervous and unstrung. If she has any statement to make, she'll make it to the sheriff privately. I don't like the idea of Perry Mason standing here bulldozing her."

Mason bowed. "I wasn't aware I was doing it, but if you feel I am upsetting your mother, I'll withdraw."

"No, no!" Bradisson exclaimed. "That isn't what I meant. I meant she would make her statement later, after the sheriff had finished with you."

"It may not have been what *you* meant," Mason said, "but it's what *I* meant. Come, Della."

"Wait a minute," Gregory said. "I'm not finished with you, Mason."

"You're quite right," Mason said, "but your most important angle at the moment is to find out about that ipecac before mother and son have a chance to confer, and *I* refuse to be questioned in the presence of the Bradissons." He started for the door.

"Wait a minute," Gregory interposed. "You're not going to walk out of here until I've searched you for that document."

"Really, Sheriff!" Mason said. "Has it ever occurred to you what county you're in? Such high-handed procedure will hardly go over now that you've left your jurisdiction. And you really should question the Bradissons before they get a chance to patch up a story. Come, Della."

It was the reference to the fact that Gregory was outside his own county that brought sudden dismay to his face. Mason calmly pushed

past him to the door.

Paul Drake, who had been a fascinated spectator, suddenly burst into applause.

The sheriff whirled on him angrily. "Who the hell are *you*?" he demanded.

Drake, with alcoholic dignity, said loftily, "If you want to put it that way, who the hell are *you*?"

Mason didn't wait to hear Gregory's answer.

As the door banged shut behind them, Della Street let out her breath. "Whew! That was close. How's the water now, Chief? Hot enough?"

"Coming to a boil," Mason said.

"You have to hand it to Mrs. Bradisson for having the courage to stage a counter-offensive," Della said.

Mason frowned as he slid in behind the steering wheel. "Unless she set a trap, and I walked into it."

"What do you mean?"

"Suppose she left that door open on purpose so I could see her juggling wills. Naturally I'd promptly jump to the conclusion that the will she was hiding was genuine. If it should turn out to be forged, that, coupled with the phony endorsement on that stock certificate, and the fact that Banning Clarke was poisoned at a meal we shared with him—"

"Chief!" Della Street interrupted in an exclamation of frightened dismay.

"Exactly," Mason said, and stepped on the foot throttle.

"But, Chief, there's no way out."

"Only one possible avenue left open," Mason said.

"What's that?"

"We don't know too much about the drowsy mosquito," Mason told her. "Velma Starler heard it. She turned on the light. The mosquito ceased flying. She turned out the light, went to the window carrying a flashlight. Someone was standing near the wall — almost directly below her window. He fired two shots. Those shots perforated the upper windowpane above Velma Starler's head. They were less than three inches apart. Is there anything about that which strikes you as being particularly unusual?"

"You mean about the shots?"

"Yes. That's partly it. Quite evidently the man didn't want to hit her. He wanted to frighten her away from the window. If he had enough skill to put those bullets within three inches of each other, he must have been a darn good shot."

"But why try to frighten her away from the window?"

Mason smiled. "The drowsy mosquito."

“What do you mean, Chief?”

“Did you notice,” Mason asked, “that when Salty Bowers made his demonstration of black light last night there was some sort of an induction coil in the mechanism by which the current of a dry battery was stepped up to sufficient voltage to work the bulb?”

She nodded.

“And,” Mason went on, “if you had been somewhere in the dark and heard that rather faint buzzing, it would have sounded very much like a mosquito that was in the room.”

Della Street was excited now. “It would, at that,” she said.

“A peculiar, somewhat lazy mosquito — perhaps a drowsy mosquito.”

“Then you think the sound Velma heard was caused by one of those black-light devices?”

“Why not? When she looked out of the window, someone was standing near the wall. Put yourself in the position of Banning Clarke. He had a bad heart. He had very valuable information. He didn’t dare trust that information to anyone. Yet the possibility that he might die and take the secret to the grave with him must have occurred to him. Therefore, he must have tried to leave some message. His reference to the drowsy mosquito becomes very significant in view of the demonstration we saw last night of fluorescent lighting.”

“You mean that he worked out a code message somewhere?”

“Exactly.”

“Then it must be in that rock wall!”

“Exactly. Remember he had all of those different rocks brought in from the desert.”

Della Street’s eyes sparkled. “And I suppose that means we’re going to be the first ones to throw a beam of invisible light on that wall and see what the message is?”

“We’re going to *try* to be first,” Mason said.

“But the prowler must have been using one of these machines.”

Mason was thoughtful. “The machine *may* have been one that Salty Bowers or Banning Clarke was using at a place on the wall a short distance from where Velma saw the prowler. The prowler *may* have been trying to find out what was going on. In any event, I think we’ve found an explanation for the drowsy mosquito.”

Chapter 20

It was too early for the distorted moon to lift itself over the horizon. For the moment, the night was dark save for the stars which, in this ocean-misted atmosphere, seemed distant, impersonal pin points.

Della Street held the flashlight. Mason carried the long, boxlike apparatus for generating black light. The house at the north end of the big grounds was silhouetted against the night as a dark rectangle. There was no sign of human occupancy anywhere in the building.

Mason took up a position some ten feet from the wall.

"All right, Della," he said, "let's have it dark."

She snapped out the flashlight.

Mason turned a switch. From the interior of the box came a low, distinctive hum, and a moment later, the darkness of the night seemed to turn slightly luminous and a deep violet.

Mason directed the rays of ultraviolet light against the wall. Almost instantly a series of colored lights winked back at him. In silence the lawyer and Della Street studied them.

"Do you make anything out of it, Chief?" she asked anxiously.

Mason didn't answer immediately. When he did, there was discouragement in his tone. "Not a darn thing. Of course, it may be in some sort of code... It's just a succession of isolated dots. There doesn't seem to be any particular pattern."

Mason moved on down the wall. "Looks pretty hopeless," he remarked, and Della's keen ears could detect the disappointment in his voice, showing to what extent he had banked on his theory.

"Perhaps it's something *else* that has to do with this ultraviolet light," she said, knowing how much it meant to them, and realizing that Mason was in a predicament from which he could extricate himself only by quick, clear thinking and that solving the mystery of the drowsy mosquito was but the first step. Failing in that, they were beaten on everything else.

"I can't imagine what it could be. The deuce of it is, Della, we're working against time... Hello, what's this!"

Mason had been moving down the wall, coming to the lower portion where the wall tapered down until it was hardly four feet high.

"It's a straight line," Della exclaimed. "Those fluorescent stones have been arranged so they make a straight line, and over here— Oh, look!"

Mason had swung the portable light over to the left so that an entirely new section of wall was brought into their field of vision. A

whole series of luminous lines appeared, as though someone had etched a roughly rectangular diagram with a phosphorescent pencil.

Della said, "There's some kind of flower with pointed petals. It's hanging upside down."

Mason frowned as he looked at the object: apparently a five-petaled flower, hanging downward from a slightly curved stem. Abruptly he exclaimed, "By George!"

"What?" Della asked.

"The Shooting Star," Mason said in low tones. "That's not a flower hanging upside down — it's a shooting star, and those lines must be the boundaries of the claims, and this cross must mark the point where Banning Clarke discovered the evidence showing it's the original Goler discovery."

"That's it," Della exclaimed, excitedly. "Gosh, Chief, I feel as though we'd just located a valley full of gold. My knees are all trembly."

Mason, apparently thinking out loud, said, "That's why he wanted to put up a fight on the fraud case. You can see his position, Della. If he tried to get any property *back* from the mining company, that would be the pay-off — the clue that would enable Bradisson to go and locate the lost Goler claim. But, by pretending he was trying to beat a hopeless case, and trying to keep Mrs. Sims from getting her claims back, Clarke managed to pull the wool over everyone's eyes — including my own."

"Then Mrs. Sims will get her claims back?" Della asked.

"Hang it," Mason muttered with exasperation, "I fixed it so she won't. I trapped Bradisson on his deposition into making statements that changed that fraud case from a hopeless case to an ironclad cinch — and by doing it, deprived my client of a fortune. Now I've got to find some way of executing a legal flip-flop before they get wise to the real value... And there's always the possibility someone else knows about this."

"About the Shooting Star and the secret of the drowsy mosquito?"

"Yes."

"You mean the prowler?"

"Yes."

"But don't you think the prowler was simply spying on Banning Clarke who was using the light to help arrange the rocks in the wall? And the prowler may have been frightened away before he learned the secret? After all, Banning Clarke *could* have stripped off his outer garments after he heard the shots the prowler fired."

"That's right," Mason said. "But remember that this prowler could always come back. He shot *after* Velma had seen him, but to keep her from turning the flashlight on him. Therefore, he shot, not to prevent

discovery but recognition, and—”

“Someone’s coming!” Della exclaimed.

“Quick, Della. We can’t afford to be caught here. Lucky we left our car away from the house.” Mason started around behind the cacti looking for a place of concealment as two dazzling headlights came crawling through the gate and turned into the driveway.

Della Street came to stand at his side, and Mason could feel her fingers digging into his arm as they stood waiting breathlessly.

The car rattled to a stop.

The motor quit its tin-pan rhythm. The headlights snapped off. After a moment, they heard the car doors open and then bang shut.

“Probably Salty coming back,” Della whispered. “Sounds like his car.”

“Wait a minute,” Mason cautioned in a low voice.

They heard Nell Sims saying, “Now then, Pete Sims, you march right in to that pantry. If you’ve made my daughter poison Banning Clarke, I’m going to lift the scalp right off your head.”

Pete’s voice had that pleading, apologetic whine which was so characteristic of him in his moments of explanation. “I tell you, honey, you don’t know anything about a man’s business. Now this mining business...”

“I know enough to know that when a man gives his wife arsenic to put in the pantry alongside the sugar bowl, he’s just crazy.”

“But listen, honey, I...”

The sound of the side door of the house opening and shutting swallowed the rest of the conversation.

Mason bent down, shoved the long box back under the heavy growth of a thick clump of spineless cactus. “We’ve got to see him, Della.”

“How do we arrange it?” Della asked.

“Bust right in the side door as big as Life. We’ve got to make a hit-and-run play. I want to see Sims and get out before the District Attorney arrives on the scene.”

They started up the walk which led to the back of the house, and reached the side door. Mason tried it, found it unlocked, and walked in; then, using Della Street’s flashlight, went back toward the kitchen.

Lights were on here, and they could hear the sound of voices. They heard Nell Sims say angrily, “Now you look at that bag, Pete Sims. That’s been opened and a whole lot of the stuff taken out.”

Sims said, “It isn’t my fault, Nell. I tell you—”

Mason opened the door, said, “Perhaps you wouldn’t mind if I asked a few questions.”

They turned to face him in surprise, Nell Sims holding a paper bag in her hand.

“Is that the arsenic?” Mason asked.

She nodded.

“Sitting in there next to the sugar container?”

“Well, not right next to it, but pretty close.”

“What’s that written on it?”

Sims said hastily, “That’s something I wrote on there so nobody would make a mistake. You can see for yourself. I printed on here: ‘GUARD CAREFULLY. PETE SIMS. PRIVATE.’”

Mason stretched out his hand. “Pete,” he said, “I want to ask you a few questions. I—” Abruptly he stopped and frowned down at the printing on the bag.

“I want you to be my lawyer,” Pete said. “I’m in awful bad, Mr. Mason and...”

The swinging door abruptly slammed open.

Mason whirled as he heard Della Street’s gasp.

Sheriff Gregory was standing in the doorway. For a moment, there was anger on his face. Then he smiled triumphantly.

“And *now*, Mr. Mason,” he said, “I am in my own bailiwick, vested with the full authority of the law. The District Attorney is waiting in his office. Either you can come along and make a statement, or I’ll hold you in jail, at least until you can get a writ of *habeas corpus*.”

Mason hesitated just long enough to make an accurate appraisal of the determination in Sheriff Gregory’s face. Then he turned to Della Street and said quietly, “You can drive the car up to the courthouse, Della. I think the sheriff prefers that I ride with him.”

Chapter 21

District Attorney Topham was a cadaverous man with hollow cheeks, a haunted expression of nervous futility, and restless mannerisms. He fidgeted slightly in the big leather-backed swivel chair behind his office desk, regarded Perry Mason with large lackluster eyes, said in the voice one uses in reciting a memorized speech, "Mr. Mason, there is evidence indicating that you have committed a crime within the limits of this county. Because you are a brother attorney who has achieved a certain prominence within the limits of your profession, I am giving you an opportunity to explain the circumstances before any formal action is taken against you."

"What do you want to know?" Mason asked.

"What have you to say to the charge that you committed larceny of a paper?"

"I took it."

"From the desk of Banning Clarke in his residence in this county?"

"That's right."

"Mr. Mason, surely you must understand the damaging effect of such an admission?"

"I don't see anything wrong with it," Mason said. "What's all the commotion about?"

"Surely, Mr. Mason, you understand that, entirely apart from the statute making it a crime to alter or deface an instrument of such a nature, the law provides that an instrument is property; that the taking of such an instrument constitutes larceny; that because the degree of the larceny is determined by the value of the property to be distributed by the instrument—"

"Now listen," Mason interrupted. "I didn't spring this before because I didn't want to have to produce the will at this time and explain the terms of it; but I'll tell you this: It is my position that this is a genuine will made by Banning Clarke in his handwriting, and dated the day prior to his death. I am named executor of that last will and testament. As such, it was my duty to take that will into my custody. In fact, if any other person had discovered that will — even you yourself — I could have demanded that you turn it over to me as the person named as the executor, or that you turn it over to the clerk of the probate court. Now then, try and find some flaw in the legality of that reasoning."

Topham ran long bony fingers over his high forehead, glanced at the sheriff, twisted his position in the chair which had apparently learned to squeak a protest against the constant fidgeting of its

occupant. "You are named as executor?"

"The sheriff's own witness admits that."

"May I see that will?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I will produce it at the proper time. I believe that under the law, although I haven't looked it up, I have thirty days."

The swivel chair squeaked again, this time a high-pitched drawn out sque-e-e-e-ak. The district attorney faced the sheriff. "If that's the truth, there's nothing we can do about it."

"No matter if he entered the house and surreptitiously removed this from the desk?" the sheriff insisted.

Mason smiled as the chair gave forth a whole series of short, sharp squeaks.

"You see," Topham explained, "if he is executor, then he is entitled to take charge of all of the property of the deceased. It was not only his right, but his duty, to go through the effects of the decedent, and I believe that he is absolutely correct in regard to the provision of the law that the will must be surrendered either to the executor or to the county clerk."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" Gregory demanded of Mason.

"You didn't ask me."

"Well, you weren't dumb, were you?"

Mason said apologetically, "Sometimes when I'm embarrassed, Sheriff, I find myself a little tongue-tied. You'll remember, Sheriff, you have threatened me with drastic action on several occasions. That embarrassed me. I became a little diffident."

The sheriff flushed. "You're not a damn bit diffident now," he said angrily.

Mason smiled at the district attorney. "Because I am not a damned bit embarrassed, Sheriff."

Chapter 22

Mason found Della Street parked in his automobile in front of the courthouse.

"How did you come out?" she asked anxiously.

"I squeezed out," Mason said, "through the front door, and it was a close squeak."

"The legal wolf is chained?" she asked.

"Not chained — roped. Because the sheriff thought he had a cinch case against me on taking that will, he went after me on that. I made him so mad he forgot all about the stock certificate. But it won't take long for him to start off on that as a new angle of approach. Hang it, at the time endorsing that stock certificate so that Moffgat couldn't trap my client seemed the only logical thing to do. Now it seems a terrible blunder to have made."

"How long a period of grace do you suppose we have, Chief?"

"Half an hour perhaps."

"Then let's start for Salty's camp."

"Not right away," Mason said. "You see, Della, in that half hour we've got to find out who killed Banning Clarke, all about the poison and who was prowling around in the grounds the night Velma heard the drowsy mosquito. When the sheriff finally starts looking for us, we'll be in the one place he'll least expect to find us."

"Banning Clarke's house?" she asked.

Mason nodded.

"Hop in," she said, "and hang on."

Mrs. Sims answered the bell. "Oh, hello," she chirped. "You're back just in time. Long Distance is trying to get you from Castaic. I didn't *think* they'd hold you long."

Mason flashed Della Street a significant glance, entered the house and went at once to the telephone. A few moments later, he heard Paul Drake's voice on the wire. "Hello, Perry. Are you sober?"

"Yes," Mason said shortly.

"All right," Drake said. "Remember, I asked you first. Now listen, Perry, I'm a little foggy, but I think a fish is nibbling at your bait."

"Go ahead."

"Man by the name of Hayward Small, a spindly chap with a gift of gab. Has a way of trying to look right through you. Know him?"

"Yes."

"Is he the fish you want?"

"If he's taking the bait, he is."

"Someone," Drake said, "has leaned on him."

"What do you mean?"

"Against his left eye. It's a beauty."

"A shiner?"

"A mouse, a shanty."

"What's his proposition?"

"Says he knows that the mine I've discovered is on the property of the Come-Back Mining Syndicate, that he has a pull with the company; if I'll take him into partnership on a fifty-fifty basis he'll guarantee to get us a thirty-three percent interest as our share, and I'll cut with him."

"If you accept the proposition, what does he want to do?"

"I don't know, but he's taking me to San Roberto with him if it's a deal. I'm on my road to Los Angeles with Harvey Brady. What do I do?"

"Does he know you're telephoning?"

"Thinks I'm telephoning a girl in Los Angeles. It's a booth in a restaurant. I've ridden this far with him."

"Okay," Mason said. "Accept the proposition and come on down."

"What do I do when he wants the information?"

Mason said, "Tell him you'll draw him a map and give him the exact location when you get to San Roberto."

"And not before?" Drake asked.

"Not unless you want to get poisoned," Mason said and hung up.

Mrs. Sims said, "Mr. Moffgat telephoned. Seems like the company wants to settle that case. He says he can't make a proposition directly to me because it wouldn't be ethical, but he says we can settle."

"Yes," Mason announced, smiling, "I feel quite certain he wants to settle it. Where's your husband?"

"He's in the kitchen."

Mason went out to where Pete Sims was sitting slumped dejectedly in a kitchen chair.

"Oh, it's you," Pete said.

Mason nodded. "I want to talk with you, Pete."

"What about?"

"About Bob."

Pete squirmed. "Bob don't ever cause me nothing but trouble."

Mason said, "Come with me. You haven't seen anything yet. Bring your typewriter and brief case, Della."

And Mason led the worried, sheepish man up the back stairs and into the room Banning Clarke had used in his lifetime.

"Sit down, Pete."

Pete sat down. "What do you want?"

"I want to know something about claim salting."

"What about it? I ain't ever done any, but I know how it's done."

"You load a shotgun shell with little nuggets of gold?" Mason

asked, "and then fire it into a ledge of quartz, and..."

Pete Sims shuddered.

"What's the matter?" Mason asked.

"That's crude, Mr. Mason. You don't do it that way at all."

"How do you do it, Pete?"

"Well, it's what Hayward Small would call a psychological proposition. You've got to make the sucker try to slip something over on you!"

"I'm afraid I don't understand," Mason said, glancing out of the corner of his eye to make certain Della Street was taking down the questions and answers.

"Well, it's like this, Mr. Mason. People are pretty well educated nowadays. They're getting smart. You try to sell them a gold brick, or try to shoot gold into a ledge of quartz, and chances are like as not they'll have read about it or seen it in a movie somewhere and just give you the horselaugh. In fact, you try to *sell* anybody a mining claim and he gets suspicious right away. If he knows mines, what you tell him don't make any difference, and if he don't know mines, he's suspicious of everything."

Quite obviously, Pete Sims was vastly relieved that Mason was asking for information rather than making direct accusations or demanding explanations. That relief made him talkative.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," Mason said.

"Well, Mr. Mason, you work it this way. You get the sucker all lined up, then you fix it so the sucker is the one that's trying to sell you."

Mason said, "You didn't work it that way with Jim Bradisson, Pete."

Pete shifted his position in the chair. "You don't know that whole story, Mr. Mason."

"What is the story, Pete?"

Pete shook his head doggedly.

"Aren't you going to tell me?"

"I've told you all I know," Pete said, his manner changing from glib friendliness to surly reticence.

"All right, Pete. No offense. Let's go back to discussing generalities. How can you make the sucker try to slip something over on you?"

"There's lots of ways."

"Can you tell me one?"

"I'll give you the basic idea back of the whole thing," Pete said. "You pretend to be the innocent guy and let the sucker be the smart guy. You're just an innocent, ignorant son of the desert, and the city slicker decides you're so dumb it would be a shame to cut you in on

any profits.”

“I don’t see how you could work that, Pete.”

Sims once more warmed to his subject. “You’ve got to be ingenious, Mr. Mason. You’ve got to do a lot of thinking, and you’ve got to have imagination. That’s why lots of people think I’m lazy. When I’m sitting around doing nothing is when I’m thinking, when I’m... I guess I’m doin’ a lot of talking, Mr. Mason.”

“That’s all right, Pete. You’re among friends,” Mason said. “I’m interested in how you can get the city slicker to try to take advantage of you.”

“They’ll do it every time. You be simple and take them out and show them some property that you want them to buy. You get enthusiastic about that property and show them all the good points. They keep drawing back into their shell. Then about lunch time you take ’em around to some property that you tell ’em belongs to you, or belongs to a friend of yours, and sit down there to eat lunch. Then you make an excuse to wander away, and you’ve planted something that the sucker can find for himself, something that makes it look like the claim is lousy with gold. You get me, Mr. Mason? He finds it while you’re gone. When you come back, he never says to you, ‘Look, Pete, we’ve struck it rich right on your own claim.’ — I’ll tell you the truth, Mr. Mason. I’ve been salting claims for twenty years and I’ve never had one of these birds pull that line on me yet.”

“How do you get the customer looking around?” Mason asked.

“Shucks, they’ll all do it. Tell ’em a claim’s rich and they’d ought to buy it, and they take only a halfway interest in it. But take ’em down to some place that looks sort of promising with nice colored rock on it and tell ’em it’s no good — and then walk away and leave ’em, and they start prowling. They’ll do it every time. That’s one thing about a sucker in the desert — he always thinks he knows more than the old-time mining men.”

Mason nodded.

“Well,” Pete went on, “that’s the way it’s put across. He begins looking around. You’ve got some rocks that’s so rich the gold is just stuck in them in chunks. You’ve blasted away a section of rock outcropping and grafted these little pieces of rock into place. If you’re good with dynamite and mixing up a little rock cement, there’s nothing to it. You can put those pieces in place so they look as though they’d been there since the Year One.

“The sucker sticks the sample of rock in his pocket and when you come back he starts asking you a lot of casual questions about the title to the property, when your option expires, and all that. Then, next thing you know, he’s sneaking around behind your back, trying to double-cross you and get the property. Or if you’ve told him you own

it outright, he starts telling you about how this is such a swell place for a desert cabin; he's never been in a place that seemed more restful to him, and all that sort of stuff. Since the thing doesn't amount to so much as a mine, he'd like to buy it for a cabin site — or he says he has a friend who has bad sinus trouble, and he would like to get this place for his friend.

"If *you'd* been the one who discovered the chunk of ore the sucker would have been suspicious. He'd have wanted to call in a couple of mining engineers and had you give him bank references before he'd even listen to you. But when *he* discovers it, and thinks he's slipping one over on you, *he* becomes the salesman and *you're* the customer. That's all there is to it. It's his own baby and he's putting it across."

"A most interesting example of practical and applied psychology," Mason said. "I think, Sims, I can use that in my business."

"Well, Mr. Mason, if that's all you want, I'll be getting back. But that's the secret of the whole business. You've got to get the sucker trying to sell you."

"Just a minute," Mason said. "Before you go, Pete, there's just one more question I want to ask."

Pete sat on the extreme edge of the chair. "Go right ahead, Mr. Mason."

Mason said, "You planted that six-gun on Banning Clarke, didn't you, Pete?"

"Why, *what* do you mean?"

Mason said, "You salted that group of your wife's claims. You sold them to Jim Bradisson. Then, after the corporation commenced its action for fraud, you realized you were in hot water, so you thought you might as well have a second string to your bow. You fixed things so Banning Clarke would think the famous Lost Goler Mine was situated on properties controlled by the Shooting Star Group, didn't you?"

"*Why, Mr. Mason!*" Sims exclaimed reproachfully.

"And in order to do that," Mason went on, "you found this old six-gun somewhere and etched the name Goler on the handle. But what you overlooked, Pete, was the fact that you have a very distinctive method of printing a capital G. And the printing you put on that bag of arsenic — '*GUARD CAREFULLY*' — had the same capital G as was on the handle of the gun."

For a moment, Pete looked Mason squarely in the eyes, then his eyes slithered away. "I don't know what you're talking about," he mumbled.

Mason turned to Della Street, "All right, Della, go get the sheriff. Tell him to bring up that bag of arsenic. We'll get that gun and compare the printing..."

"No, no, no!" Sims exclaimed. "Don't do that. Now don't go off half-cocked like this, Mr. Mason. Don't bring that sheriff into it again."

Mason grinned. "Make up your mind, Pete."

Sims heaved a long sigh. "Give me a cigarette."

Mason gave him one, and Sims lighted it. All the resistance seemed to have oozed out of him. "All right," he said. "I did it. That's what happened."

"Now tell us about the arsenic," Mason said.

"It's just like I told the sheriff. I got that for..."

"For what?" Mason asked as Sims hesitated.

"Just for experimenting." Sims twisted his position in the chair.

"Perhaps you'd better get the sheriff after all, Della."

Pete might not have heard. He went on as though he had never balked at the question in the first place. "This lost mines business could be quite a racket, Mr. Mason. I realized that when I saw the way Banning Clarke fell for that six-gun business. I'd been a fool — going around salting claims and juggling samples and all of that kind of business. All you've got to do is see that people know about some of these famous lost mines, and then leave just a little clue that will make 'em think they've got hold of a lost mine. You pretend that you don't know a thing in the world about the significance of it or what it is. You get me?"

Mason nodded.

"Now on that Shooting Star claim," Pete went on, "the time I sold it to Jim Bradisson I certainly went at it crude. I'll tell you the truth. I was pretty well plastered at the time, and Jim kept shooting off his mouth about what a big mining executive he was — and he was so damned easy I just didn't take any pains to cover my tracks.

"But when I realized I needed to fix it up so he wouldn't yell he'd been stuck, I tumbled onto this idea of planting a six-shooter and letting Banning Clarke find it and tell Jim. I'd found this old six-shooter out in the desert quite a while back. I simply etched the name Goler on the handle and rubbed wet tea leaves over it until the printing looked good and old. Then I planted it down by a little spring that's on the property, leaving just a few inches of the muzzle sticking up, the rest of it buried in the sand. I got Banning Clarke out there with me. That was before his heart got so bad he couldn't travel at all, but it was bad enough so he had to keep quiet. I told him I wanted to do just a little prospecting around, and I knew he'd go over to the spring and sit down. I'd planted a whole bunch of nuggets in the spring right near the gun. Well, there was nothing to it. As soon as I came back, I saw the gun wasn't there, and Clarke was so excited he could hardly talk. I pretended I didn't notice nothing.

"I thought Clarke, being a stockholder in the company, would see

that they didn't make any squawk about the deal I'd handed them, but Clarke got so sold on the idea he'd uncovered the lost Goler Diggings that he actually wanted my wife to get the claims back. He thought she was entitled to them more than the corporation, I guess. Well, there I was, in a devil of a fix, Mr. Mason.

"Later on, I managed to see that Jim Bradisson got tipped off that Clarke had discovered the Lost Goler Diggings. Clarke hadn't been out in the desert for six months before that time he'd been with me. I thought Bradisson would be smart enough to put two and two together and figure the mine must be located on the Shooting Star Group. But Jim wasn't smart at all. He went ahead with the fraud action, and darned if Banning didn't get *you* to fight the lawsuit. By that time, it was all mixed up. I didn't know just what he was doing. I see it now. He was trying to have 'Nell put up enough fight in the case so that Jim wouldn't get suspicious and decide to hang onto that property. — Now, that's the absolute truth."

"And this arsenic?" Mason asked.

"Well, if you want to know the real low-down, Mr. Mason, I decided to go into this lost mines as a racket. I guess I'm just a miserable, no-good skunk. But don't get me wrong. I ain't reformin' none. I'm scared stiff now, but I know myself well enough to know I'll keep right on being a claim-salter.

"If you was someone else I'd pull an act about being sorry, and make such a swell job of it I'd even convince myself... I used to be a damn good liar, Mr. Mason. That was before I met Hayward Small and he tried to hypnotize me, and told me a lot about these here secondary personalities. I pretended he'd hypnotized me. I don't know but what maybe he did, at that. And then I rung in this secondary personality.

"Well, it just ruined me as a liar, Mr. Mason. It was so easy blaming things on Bob, I got all out of practice on real good lying. It came to me with a shock when that lawyer tied me all up in knots the way he did.

"Believe you me, I ain't going to let anybody do my lying for me from now on. I'm getting rid of Bob, *pronto!* I've got to brush up. You understand?"

"I understand, Pete. But specifically, what did you intend to do with the arsenic?"

"Well, now, this Lost Peg-Leg Mine," Sims said, "and a couple of other mines that have been lost out in the desert — the reason they get lost is because the gold is black. It's covered on the outside with some sort of a deposit that turns it black. When you scratch down inside, it's good yellow gold, but the nuggets look like little black rocks. I heard that it was some kind of arsenic compound, and I

decided to get this arsenic and experiment with some gold and see if I could get that black coating on it. If I could, I thought I'd trim the next sucker by letting him think he'd discovered the Lost Peg-Leg Mine. That cattleman and his partner who think *they've* discovered the Lost Goler Mine — that cattleman's all swelled up with the idea he can go out and locate lost mines by scientific methods. Well, I was going to let him get the Lost Peg-Leg."

"Did you use this arsenic?" Mason asked.

"No, Mr. Mason, I didn't have to. To tell you the truth, I'd forgotten all about that arsenic. Shortly after I got it I found where there was some of this black gold — not much of it, but enough so I could salt a claim."

Mason said, "You've had some arrangement with Hayward Small."

Sims shifted his position. "Now, Mr. Mason, you're all wet on that. That's one thing you shouldn't say. Hayward Small is just as square a shooter as there is in the world. My wife don't like him because he's kind of shining up to Dorina, but Dorina's got to get married some day and she'll go a long, long ways before she gets a better boy than Hayward Small."

Mason smiled and shook his head. "Remember the sheriff, Pete."

Sims sighed wearily. "Oh, all right. What's the use? Sure, I stood in with Hayward Small, and Small's got some kind of a club he's holding over Jim Bradisson."

"What?"

"I don't know, but I know it's a club. I've been salting claims for Small, and Small's been selling them to the corporation."

"And he was in on this Shooting Star deal?"

"Nope. That was on my own. Understand, I ain't been partners with Small. He's just been paying me so much a job to salt mines for him. He's fooled on that Goler mine, himself."

"Hayward Small knew that you had this arsenic?" Mason asked.

"He knew about it, yes. He was the one who told me not to use it. He said he knew where we could get some of this black gold."

"And did you poison Banning Clarke?" Mason asked.

"Who, me!"

Mason nodded.

"Gosh, no. Get that idea out of your head."

"Or shoot him?"

"Listen, Mr. Mason, Banning Clarke was a square guy. I wouldn't have touched a hair of his head."

"And you haven't any idea who put the poison in that sugar bowl?"

"No, sir, I haven't."

Mason said, "You don't know what hold it is that Small has over Jim Bradisson, do you?"

"No, sir, I don't, but it's a hold all right. You can take it from me, Jim Bradisson is afraid of Hayward Small. It's some sort of blackmail."

"You don't really think Small is a proper person to be Dorina's husband, do you?"

"I'll say he ain't. If I'd been here, he'd never have had the nerve to go to Nevada with her."

"But they didn't get married?"

"The way I get the story," Sims said with a grin, "that soldier boy that's been sort of sweet on Dorina got himself a twenty-four-hour leave and was sort of hanging around Las Vegas — and I guess when the soldier got done with him, Hayward Small decided he wasn't going to marry anybody. He didn't feel like a bridegroom. He's still got quite an eye on him."

Mason said, "Well, I guess that covers it, Pete. Thanks a lot."

Pete got eagerly to his feet. "Mr. Mason, I can't begin to tell you how much it means to me to talk right frank with someone that can really understand. If you've ever got any desert property you want to get rid of at a fancy price — No, you wouldn't have; but if there's ever anything I can do, you just call on me."

When he had gone, Mason grinned over at Della Street.

"We're going to use some of Pete's psychology," he said. "Feed some stationery in your portable typewriter. Put it up on that desk — right under the light."

"How many copies?" Della asked.

"One," Mason said.

"What is it," she asked, "a document for someone to sign, a letter, or..."

"It's a piece of claim salting," Mason announced, "and we're going to let the sucker discover it. Our interview with Pete Sims is going to be highly productive."

Della Street ratcheted the paper into the machine, held her fingers poised over the keyboard.

Mason said, "We'll start this in the middle of a sentence up near the top of the page. Put a page number on it — make it page twenty-two, and then put just below that, *'Transcript of statements made to Sheriff Gregory!'*"

Della Street's fingers rippled the keyboard into a swift staccato of noise. When she paused, Mason said, "Just down below that, write *Continuation of statement of James Bradisson*. — All right, now let's start the top of the page in the middle of a sentence, say, *'that is, to the best of my knowledge and belief.'* — Now then, make a paragraph and put *Question by sheriff: 'Then you are prepared to swear, Mr. Bradisson,*

that you saw Hayward Small tampering with the sugar bowl?' Answer: 'I did. Yes, sir.' Paragraph. Question: 'You not only saw him put the note under the sugar bowl, but you are willing to swear you saw him raise the lid of the sugar bowl?' Paragraph. Answer: 'I did. Yes, sir. But I want you to remember that there are certain reasons why I must not be called as a witness until the time of trial. Once you get him before a jury, I'll be the surprise witness that will get a conviction. I can afford to go on the stand when you've already made a case against him, but you'll have to make up a case against him based on other testimony than mine.' Paragraph. Statement by Sheriff Gregory: 'I understand that, Mr. Bradisson. I've told you that we would try to respect your confidence. However, I can't promise definitely. Now, about the arsenic. You say that Pete Sims had told him about having a supply of arsenic on hand?' Answer: 'That's right. Sims wanted to use it in connection with some gold treatment, but Small told him not to use it, that he could get some of the black gold Sims wanted elsewhere.' Paragraph. Question: 'Who told you that?' Paragraph. Answer: 'Sims.' Paragraph. Question: 'Hayward Small never confirmed that?' Paragraph. Answer: 'Not in so many words, no.' "

"Getting down to the end of the page?" Mason asked Della Street.

"Right at the end," she said.

"All right," Mason said. "Leave that in the typewriter. Leave the light on. Take your brief case with you. Now, wait a minute. We'll want to plant some cigarette stubs around here as though the room had been used for a conference. Tear some cigarettes in two. We'll light them and leave stubs around.

"It's touch-and-go, Della. If the sheriff ever thinks to question Dorina about whether she knows anything about the signing of the endorsement on that stock certificate, the fat's in the fire."

Della Street looked at him curiously. "Did Hayward Small poison the sugar?" she asked.

Mason smiled. "Ask Mrs. Sims what the proverb is about the goose that lays the golden eggs coming home to roost."

"Then why are you putting that in the written statement?"

Mason's face was suddenly serious. "To the best of my ability," he said, "I am carrying out the wishes of a dead client."

Chapter 23

Sheriff Gregory plunged ahead with his midnight investigation with the bulldog tenacity of a man who has both rugged health and stubborn determination. District Attorney Topham, on the other hand, plainly felt that the matter could well have waited until Monday morning. He hadn't the physical stamina to waste energy arguing the matter, however, and showed his disapproval only by the passive resignation of his countenance and the manner in which he kept himself in the psychological background.

Sheriff Gregory looked at his watch. "It shouldn't be long, now," he said. "I'm going to get at the bottom of certain phases of this matter before leaving here."

Mason stretched his hands high above his head. He yawned, smiled at the District Attorney, and said, "Personally, I see no reason for such nocturnal haste."

The District Attorney lowered and raised his eyelids with slow deliberation. "I think we should place a limit on it."

"The limit," Gregory said, "will be when we find out what's been going on around here. There's evidence that the signature on those stock certificates is *not* the signature of Banning Clarke." He glowered at Mason.

Once more Mason yawned. "If you ask me," he said, "the place fairly reeks with mysteries. If Banning Clarke was dying with poison and had only a few gasps left in his system, why did someone have to hurry it along with a .38 caliber automatic? What could Clarke have done with those last few breaths that would have been so devastating to the one who fired the shot?"

"And what are you going to do if you *do* find the poisoner? He'll claim the murderer was the man who fired the gun. And how about that person? He'll claim the victim was suffering from a fatal dose of poison. On the whole, gentlemen, you have a tough nut to crack."

The chimes at the front door tinkled into noise.

"I'll open it," Mason said.

Gregory pushed past him, jerked the door back.

An inebriated Paul Drake elevated a long forefinger, then brought it down on a level with the surprised sheriff's coat lapel.

"*Never* jerk a door open like that," Paul reproached. "If your guests should fall in, flat on their faces, they could bring suit."

"Who are you?" the sheriff demanded. "Oh yes — I know now. You're the man who found the mine."

"'Discovered' is a better word, Sheriff. Finding implies an element of luck. Discovery denotes planning and—"

“Oh, there’s Small. Come on in, Small. I want to question you.”

Small extended his hand. “How are you, Sheriff? I hardly expected to find you here. How are you?” he greeted. “And Mr. Mason. Good evening, Mr. Mason. I brought a friend with me.”

Sheriff Gregory said, “Small, I want you to answer this question fairly and frankly. Do you know anything about the endorsement on the shares of stock that—”

“Just a moment,” Mason interrupted. “I am going to suggest that any statements from any of these witnesses be made where the answers can be taken down in shorthand. You’ve asked other witnesses various questions in a manner that I don’t think was fair.”

“You don’t have anything to say about *my* questions,” Gregory interrupted angrily. “I am conducting this investigation.”

“Go right ahead, if you feel that way about it,” Mason retorted.

Paul Drake said, “But not in a drafty hallway, please.”

“What are *you* doing here?” Gregory asked.

“Waiting for a drink,” Paul told him. “The hospitality with which you greeted me, all but jerking the door off its hinges, seems a most favorable omen. But I find your attitude, my dear sir, sadly at variance with the initial cordiality with which you answered the bell.”

“Get this drunk out of here,” Gregory ordered.

“On the contrary,” Mason announced. “This man has come to talk with me on a business proposition — a matter which relates to the estate of Banning Clarke, deceased. And as the executor of Banning Clarke, I have the right...”

“You come with me,” Gregory said to the reluctant Hayward Small.

Mason handed Hayward Small a key. “Go on up to Banning Clarke’s room,” he said. “You and the District Attorney can conduct your investigation up there.”

“Very good,” Gregory grunted.

They were halfway up the stairs when Mason called, “Oh, Sheriff.”

“What?”

“There’s one thing I think you should know before you proceed with that questioning.”

“What is it?”

“Something that — May I speak with you and the District Attorney for a moment, please?”

Gregory hesitated. Mason started up the stairs, said, “Go right on up to Banning Clarke’s room, Small. I just want a word with the sheriff.”

Small went on up the stairs. Mason climbed to Sheriff Gregory’s side. “Look here, Sheriff,” he said in a low voice, “there’s no need for

us to get at loggerheads over this. If you'll calm down a bit, you'll see that I'm working toward the same end that you are. I want to solve this murder case."

The District Attorney said, "Gentlemen, can't we get it over with without so much friction? After all, it seems to me that all we can hope to do now is to get preliminary statements and then adjourn."

"I want to warn you," Mason said, "that you'd better have your interview with Hayward Small reduced to writing; otherwise, you'll regret it."

"I haven't a court reporter here," Gregory said. "This is merely a preliminary."

"My secretary can take it."

The sheriff's smile was skeptical.

"That's better than nothing," Mason said.

The sheriff turned angrily away. "I think not," he said. "I am beginning now to sympathize with my brother-in-law."

"Well," Mason announced, "anything that I say will be taken down by my secretary."

"I don't give a damn what *you* say," Gregory told him.

"Can't we keep the questioning on a more dignified plane?" Topham protested wearily.

"Come on," Gregory said, and started up the stairs.

Mason, descending the stairs, grinned at Della Street. "Now," he announced, "we'll find out whether Pete's psychology actually works in practice."

Drake said, "Perry, I'm comparatively sober. The long ride in the cool of the night has brushed cobwebs from my brain, but it has also given me something of a chill. Wouldn't it be possible for you to scare me up a drink?"

"No drink," Mason told him. "You're going to need to have your wits about you."

Drake sighed. "Well, there was no harm in trying."

"Come on," Mason said in a low voice. "Give me the low-down. What have you found out?"

"I assume," Drake said with alcoholic verbosity, "that you wished me to pump the gentleman who accompanied me from Mojave — to turn him inside out, as it were."

"I did."

"Your wishes have been followed to the letter."

"What did you find out?"

"Small has some hold over Bradisson."

"How long has he had this hold?"

"That," Drake admitted, "is something that also occurred to me. I realized that one could hardly expect the man to tell me the nature of

his strangle hold on Bradisson, but that there might be other and more devious ways of getting the information. I therefore endeavored to ascertain the exact date when Small first became acquainted with Bradisson. Now, Small only met Bradisson in January of nineteen forty-two, and almost immediately moved right into the charmed circle."

"January of nineteen forty-two, eh?" Mason said musingly.

"That's right. He—"

A door opened explosively in the upper corridor. Pounding feet came toward the head of the stairs.

"Sounds like our impulsive sheriff," Drake observed.

Greggory shouted, "Mason, come up here!"

"The summons is a bit peremptory," Drake observed. "I'm afraid, Perry, you've been doing it again."

Mason nodded to Della Street, then halfway up the stairs said, "You'd better come along, Paul. I may want a witness."

"Your assignments," Drake said, "range from the sublime to the ridiculous. How in hell can I climb stairs?"

As Mason entered the room, Greggory indignantly pointed at the typewriter. "What the devil is this?" he demanded.

"Why," Mason said, "the notes of the investigation you made..."

"But I made no such investigation."

Mason looked nonplused. "I'm afraid I don't understand, Sheriff. Della Street certainly took down..."

Greggory's face purpled. "Damn it, don't try to pull that innocent stuff with me. You've interfered in this case too damn much. I'm conducting this investigation, and I'll conduct it in my own way."

"Yes, Sheriff. Certainly."

"The idea of leaving that sheet of paper there in the typewriter. What are you trying to do?"

Mason turned to Della Street reproachfully. "Della, I thought the sheriff told you to get all of those papers cleaned out of this room and then lock it."

Della's eyelashes lowered demurely on her cheeks. "I'm sorry."

Topham glanced from Mason to the sheriff. There was quiet reproach in his eyes.

Mason said, "I'm sorry, Sheriff," as one apologizing for a justifiable oversight.

The sheriff's anger made him all but inarticulate. "I tell you I didn't conduct any investigation here. I merely had an informal inquiry before you got here, Topham."

"Yes, of course," Mason agreed hastily — too hastily, in fact. "You wouldn't want to investigate without Mr. Topham."

Harvey Small's restless eyes moved from face to face, missing no

flicker of expression, taking in every word that was said.

Mason nudged Della Street quite obviously.

Della said hastily, "That's right, Mr. Topham. There wasn't any investigation. I'm sorry."

Mason ripped the page out of the typewriter, said to Small, "It's a mistake. We're sorry, Sheriff."

Greggory glared at Mason. "You'll pay for this. You'll..."

"But I told you I was sorry. My secretary shouldn't have left it here. We've apologized. We've told Small that there wasn't any investigation. We've told Topham that. We've all agreed on it. *You* say there wasn't any, and *we* say there wasn't any. Now, what more do you want? The more you say now, the more suspicious you make your witness."

For the moment, Greggory was at a loss for words.

Mason went on smoothly enough, "And, frankly, I don't see any reason why you should adopt this attitude. Ever since January of nineteen forty-two, Hayward Small has been blackmailing Bradisson. Of course, that gives Bradisson a motive to pin the murder on Small; but if you ask *me*, Sheriff, I think Bradisson is—"

"No one's asking you," the sheriff interrupted.

Mason bowed after the manner of one who is rebuked by a person in authority. Thereafter, he became conspicuously silent.

Greggory turned to Hayward Small. "What I'm trying to find out," he said, "is about that stock."

Small moistened his lips with his tongue, merely nodded.

"What about it?" Greggory asked.

"All I know is what Dorina told me."

"Well, what was that?"

Mason said reproachfully, "Hearsay testimony. I wouldn't repeat it, Small. You can't vouch for it, you know."

"You keep out of this," Greggory shouted.

"After he gets that out of you, he'll start giving you a third-degree on the murder charge, you know," Mason observed. "How about a cigarette — anyone want a cigarette?"

He calmly took his cigarette case from his pocket.

"Thank you, I'll take one," Della Street said sweetly.

Greggory said angrily, "Get out of here. Clear out!"

"But I thought you wanted me," Mason said.

"I wanted an explanation of this..."

"Oh, yes. Do you want to go into that again?"

"No, I don't."

Hayward Small, who had been doing more thinking, said suddenly, "Look here, I'm going to come clean on this thing. I had absolutely nothing to do with that poisoning. I did — well, I did bring

a little pressure to bear on Jim Bradisson about eighteen months ago.”

“January, nineteen forty-two, wasn’t it?” Mason asked.

“That’s right.”

“Very shortly after Mrs. Banning Clarke passed away, I believe.”

Small said nothing.

“And Moffgat began exerting a little pressure at about the same time,” Mason said.

“I’m not interested in any of this,” Gregory announced.

“I am,” Topham said, his voice packing quiet authority. “Just let Mr. Mason continue, please, Sheriff.”

Gregory said angrily, “He’s stage-managed this whole damn business. He’s trying to cover up the forgery of a stock certificate and save his own neck by—”

“Nevertheless,” Topham interrupted in a quiet tone which cut through the sheriff’s anger with the force of a cold rebuke, “I want Mr. Mason left entirely alone. Go right ahead, Mr. Mason.”

Mason bowed. “Thank you.” He turned to Small. “About the time Mrs. Banning Clarke died, wasn’t it?”

Small’s eyes met Mason’s for a moment, then shifted. “Well... yes.”

“Now,” Mason went on, “we have a very interesting situation. We have Mrs. Bradisson tiptoeing into Banning Clarke’s room and substituting an old will in place of the new one. A very adroit method of validating a spurious document. A will, of course, is revoked by a later will where the testator’s intention to revoke is plainly evidenced by the later will; but unless the earlier will is destroyed, there is nothing on its face to show that it has been superseded — a point which, ordinarily, a layman wouldn’t figure out. Such an ingenious bombproof little scheme would be far more apt to have been hatched in the mind of some clever attorney. I can’t help wondering whether Mrs. Bradisson’s idea of exchanging wills didn’t date back to an earlier episode. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you, Small?”

Hayward Small raised his hand to the collar of his shirt, twitched it as though the neckband were exerting unusual pressure. “No.”

Sheriff Gregory started to say something. Topham motioned him to silence.

Mason said, almost musingly, “You see, gentlemen, we are confronted with a poisoning and with a shooting — two entirely different crimes. Yet we must not overlook the fact that they may have been actuated by the same motive. Two different murderers, each pursuing his way independent of the other because he didn’t dare to take the other into his confidence — one using poison, the other using lead.

“Because of the peculiar circumstances, we are forced to think

back over everything that happened, interpreting each clue, and making pure deduction give us the answer we want.

"Now, I submit, gentlemen, here was Hayward Small, a friend and acquaintance of Moffgat, the lawyer, a virtual stranger to James Bradisson, and to his mother, Mrs. Bradisson. In the early part of January, nineteen hundred and forty-two, Mrs. Banning Clarke dies. A will is offered for probate leaving all of her property to her mother and her brother, and intimating that it is no great amount of property. Almost immediately afterwards, Moffgat and Hayward become very favored personages. The lawyer becomes a stockholder in the company. Hayward Small becomes a mining broker, though he has never sold any mines before. Now, however, he sells mines right and left — and sells them all at fancy prices to the corporation which now consists largely of Mrs. Bradisson and her son James. What's the answer?"

"You're crazy," Hayward Small said. "I don't know what you're getting at, but you're all wet."

"Could it possibly be," Mason said, "that Small was one of the witnesses to a will made at a later date, and that — with the connivance of all parties concerned — this will was suppressed?"

"You're making a grave charge," Greggory blurted.

"Certainly I am," Mason said, eyeing him coldly. "Perhaps, Sheriff, you have some other logical explanation of what happened."

"That's a lie," Small said. "Nothing like that happened."

"And," Mason went on, turning to the District Attorney, "that, Mr. District Attorney, would account for Bradisson's anxiety to see that the crime was pinned on Hayward Small. It would account for the testimony given by Bradisson and his mother that is so damaging to this witness. *If* he had been blackmailing them, and *if* they could get him convicted of murder, without appearing to do so, it would—"

"But," the sheriff all but shouted at the District Attorney, "there wasn't any such investigation. Bradisson never made any such statement."

Topham turned reproachful eyes on the sheriff. It was quite apparent that he didn't believe him either.

"Call Bradisson in. Ask him," the sheriff interpolated angrily.

Mason's patronizing, superior smile disposed of that suggestion without words.

Small blurted abruptly, "Listen, I'm not going to be framed with any murder rap. If Jim Bradisson is trying to push off anything on me, I'll..."

"You'll what?" Mason asked as Small became abruptly silent.

"I won't stand for it, that's all."

Mason said, "Don't worry, Small. You don't stand a chance. The

sheriff in this county is one of the old-fashioned type who believes in acting on secret tips, on keeping his witnesses in the background. You've seen the extent to which he's gone to convince you that Bradisson didn't do anything of the sort. You won't ever see Bradisson's hand in the matter until after you're standing up in front of the judge to hear the death sentence."

Greggory said, "I'm not going to stand for—"

"*Please!*" Topham interrupted.

Greggory checked himself under the domination of the District Attorney's tired eyes.

"Now," Mason went on, "personally I'd be very much inclined to doubt Bradisson's statement. It doesn't sound logical to me. I see no reason why Hayward Small should have put arsenic in the sugar bowl. On the other hand, there are plenty of reasons why Bradisson should have put the poison in the sugar. Look at the evidence impartially, gentlemen. Bradisson and his mother apparently developed symptoms of arsenic poisoning. It turns out that this poisoning was self-induced, caused by taking ipecac. Need we look far for a reason? They intended that on the next night Hayward Small should die of arsenic poisoning. Then you'd have a baffling mystery in which the real poisoners would never be suspected because they themselves had apparently been first on the list of victims. A person who is blackmailing doesn't want to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs, but the person who is being blackmailed always wants to kill the blackmailer."

Topham glanced speculatively at Small, almost imperceptibly nodded his head.

Small said, "You're making all this up. You're just talking."

"But," Mason went on, "the scheme went astray because that night Hayward Small didn't go over and help himself to his usual evening cup of tea. The reason he didn't was that he was planning to run away with Mrs. Sims' daughter, and he knew that Mrs. Sims didn't approve of him. He was somewhat afraid of her uncanny intuitive powers, her sharp tongue, and her shrewd eyes. So he kept on the outskirts, leaving Dorina to put the note under the sugar bowl. That upset Bradisson's plans.

"Now, we can almost determine the exact time when that arsenic was placed in the sugar. It was placed in there *after* Della Street, Banning Clarke, Mrs. Sims and I had had our first cups of tea, because Mrs. Sims poured herself a *fourth* cup of tea, was the *fourth* to take sugar from the bowl — And she felt no ill effects. Then the persons who had been at that stockholders' meeting entered the room. There was, of course, a certain amount of confusion with people passing back and forth around the table. *Then* Banning Clarke had a second cup of tea and put sugar in it. At that time he got the largest dose of

poison, showing that the arsenic was at that time on top of the sugar, so that he got nearly all of it... Then, Della Street and I had a second cup, had sugar, and received a relatively small amount of arsenic. Now then, gentlemen, I submit that Bradisson was trying to poison Hayward Small, counting on Small's habit of usually having a cup of tea when he entered the kitchen. Failing in his attempt at poison, Bradisson now tries to accomplish his end by making a highly confidential statement to the sheriff that he knows Hayward Small is guilty, and if the sheriff will get Small to trial on other evidence, Bradisson will be the surprise witness who sends him to the death cell."

Mason stopped talking, apparently centering his attention entirely on the District Attorney, paying no more attention to Harvey Small than if Small had been a mere casual spectator.

"How does that sound, Mr. District Attorney?"

"It sounds very, very logical," the District Attorney said.

Small blurted out, "The lawyer's right. Damn Jim Bradisson for a double-crossing back-stabber. I should have known he'd try something like that. All right, damn him. Now *I'll* do a little talking, and *I'll* tell the truth."

"That," Mason said, "is very much better."

Small said, "I knew Moffgat, used to hang around his office a bit. I dug up a little business for him. Nothing like an ambulance chaser, you understand, but just a friend of his who brought in business, and he did favors for me. I happened to be in his office one Friday morning. I'll never forget the date — the fifth of December, nineteen hundred and forty-one. The reason I'll never forget is that we all know what happened on December seventh. Well, I was waiting in the outer office to see Moffgat. Mrs. Banning Clarke was in the office with him. I'd never met her. Moffgat opened the door of the private office and looked out to see who was in the outer office. He saw me sitting there and asked if I'd mind stepping in and acting as witness to a will."

"And you did so?"

"Yes."

"And what happened subsequently?"

"You know."

"You don't know what was in that will?"

"No. I only know that along in January I read about Mrs. Clarke's dying and about a will's being offered for probate. I asked Moffgat if I didn't have to testify as a witness to that will, and he acted so strangely about it I began to do a little thinking. I went and looked *up* the records. Well, it didn't take me long to figure out what had happened when I saw that they were probating a will dated a year or so earlier and signed before two other witnesses. — I just climbed

aboard the gravy train, that's all. Nothing crude, you understand, but I made myself a broker of mining properties. Then I called on Bradisson, mentioned casually that I had known his sister, that I'd been a witness to a will she'd made very shortly before she died. That was all I needed to say. After that, when I suggested that the mining company should buy one of my properties at the price I put on it, the money was forthcoming. I didn't run a willing horse to death, you understand, but I saw to it that my business was reasonably profitable."

"Now," Mason said to the District Attorney, "if we could locate the *other* witness to that will, we might find out something about Banning Clarke's murder."

Small said, "The other witness was named Craiglaw. He was waiting in the office at the same time I was. We happened to strike up an acquaintance. That's all I know about him — that his name was Craiglaw, and that he was a man about fifty-four or fifty-five years old."

Mason said to the District Attorney, "There is one phase of this matter that has never been explained. When Banning Clarke left the room immediately after drinking the poisoned cup of tea, Moffgat was trying to get me to stipulate to taking his deposition. Moffgat had a subpoena all ready to serve on him, and Moffgat said that he was going to serve that subpoena. It would have been logical for Moffgat to try to do so; yet apparently he made no such attempt. That would seem to indicate that he had other plans.

"At the time, I was just a little stupid. I underestimated Moffgat's intelligence. I thought that he was dumb enough to let a witness he wanted slip through his fingers. But Moffgat wasn't dumb — he was shrewd enough to know that if he flashed this subpoena on me, I would signal Banning Clarke to get out of the way. Then, Moffgat would have had an excellent excuse to go out in the cactus garden to try and serve his subpoena. If he had been caught there, he could simply have said, 'Why, I'm here trying to serve this subpoena.' But if he *wasn't* caught there, if no one saw him enter, if he found Banning Clarke lying asleep on the sand, then he needed only to squeeze the trigger on an automatic and get off the premises. I notice that the sheriff checked on where everyone was at the time Dr. Kenward was wounded, but he didn't check on Moffgat. Moffgat had announced he was driving back to Los Angeles, and for some reason, Sheriff Gregory took that entirely at its face value.

"A short time ago, Moffgat was trying very hard indeed to have the sale of the Shooting Star Group rescinded on the ground of fraud. More lately, he's been talking about settling the case and keeping the claims. There's just a chance that Moffgat spied on Banning Clarke

when he was working on his wall. Or Moffgat may possibly have manipulated a beam of invisible light from a machine of his own. And if you turn a beam of invisible light on the lower part of that rock wall you'll see what I mean — the low portion where even a man with heart trouble could manipulate the little rocks around.

“Evidently Banning Clarke was beginning to suspect something about what Moffgat had done, something of the true nature of Small's hold over Bradisson. I wouldn't doubt that Banning Clarke had some rather damaging bit of evidence which he was keeping in his desk. I do know that evidence had been tampered with. *I* found only a small phial and a dying mosquito. If Clarke had put that mosquito in the little bottle at the time he made the will, the insect would have been dead before I ever saw it.

“You know, Sheriff, if I were you, and if I had a brother-in-law in Los Angeles who is as clever and adroit as Lieutenant Tragg, I think I'd ring him up and suggest it would be a feather in both of your caps to apprehend Moffgat on a charge of first-degree murder, and whisk him out of Los Angeles County and up to San Roberto before he had a chance to start using any *habeas corpus* or taking steps to bring pressure to bear on the witnesses.”

Chapter 24

Afternoon shadows were collecting in purple pools on the desert floor far below when Mason and Della Street drove around the last turn in the grade, to roll out on the plateau mesa where Salty had his camp.

Salty Bowers came ambling over toward the car as Mason brought it to a stop. There was hostility and suspicion in his manner until he recognized the car. Then he slouched into friendliness.

Mason and Della Street clambered out and stretched travel-stiffened limbs.

"Brought you some news," Mason said. "And then we're going to stay up here for a day or two and get some of the so-called civilization purified out of our minds. Your murder is all solved."

"Who did it?"

"Sheriff Gregory and Lieutenant Tragg working in Los Angeles."

"No. I mean who did the murder?"

"Oh — Moffgat killed Banning Clarke. He took a shot at Dr. Kenward first, thinking he was shooting at the sleeping figure of Banning Clarke. After he found out his mistake, he learned about your departure in the house trailer and started looking for you. He probably would never have found you if it hadn't been that, just by chance, you drove under a street light a couple of blocks in front of him. Banning Clarke had been poisoned and you were looking for medical attention. When you went in to telephone the hospital, Moffgat simply opened the door of the house trailer, walked in, pulled the trigger, and walked out. It was that simple and that fast."

"Why did he do it?" Salty asked.

"That," Mason said, "is the part of it that has a direct bearing on you."

Salty raised his eyebrows.

"Mrs. Banning Clarke made a will in December of nineteen forty-one. She died in January of nineteen forty-two. Hayward Small was a witness to the new will. The other witness was a man by the name of Craiglaw. The Bradissons bribed Moffgat to say nothing about the latter will and to offer the earlier one for probate. That earlier will had been made before Banning Clarke gave his wife the stock in the mine. At that time she didn't have a great deal of property in her own name, so she left it all to her mother and brother, share and share alike."

"But why kill Banning Clarke?" Salty asked.

"Because Banning Clarke had uncovered a clue. In going through some of his wife's papers he found a diary, and under date of

December fifth there was an entry in the diary: '*Went to Los Angeles — witnesses, Rupert Craiglaw and Hayward Small.*' That clue in the diary was all that Banning Clarke had to work on. You remember that he told me he was going to want me in connection with another matter. His pooling agreement and getting me to represent Mrs. Sims in that fraud suit were just excuses to give him an opportunity to size me up. He'd been double-crossed by one lawyer. He didn't want to repeat the experience.

"After the shooting, and the poisoning of the Bradissons, Clarke thought his life might be in danger. He wasn't quite ready to confide in me as yet, but, in the event something happened to him, he wanted me to go ahead and see that justice was done. You must remember that he knew the seriousness of his heart condition, and had to plan every move with the constant thought in mind that he might die at any minute."

Salty fished a plug of tobacco from his pocket, bit of? a corner and rolled it over into his cheek.

"Moffgat came out to the house after he had killed Clarke. The Bradissons weren't there. Della and I were lying asleep, under the influence of drugs. Velma Starler was engaged in waiting on Dr. Kenward, who had, of course, been wounded by Moffgat when he shot him.

"Moffgat looked through Clarke's desk. He would have destroyed Clarke's will if it hadn't been that he was afraid Clarke might have told me about it, and — if so — that when the will couldn't be found I'd become suspicious of what had really happened. But Clarke had mentioned in his will that the clue he was leaving me was contained in a certain drawer of his desk; it was where he had left his wife's diary. But Moffgat, with diabolical ingenuity — knowing that I would be looking for some clue, and remembering what Velma had said about the drowsy mosquito, and because Clarke had also mentioned that in his will — emptied some gold out of a little phial, caught a mosquito, put it in the phial, and left it there for me. — The noise of the drowsy mosquito, of course, was the noise made by one of those black-light machines as Moffgat either surreptitiously deciphered the message Banning Clarke had left in the stone well, or spied on Clarke when Clarke was putting the finishing touches to the fluorescent diagram he left there.

"Clarke's will left everything to you, Salty. The mining stock that was placed in my name, I am of course holding as trustee for you, although I didn't dare admit it earlier. The estate not only includes that, but also all of the other property which was fraudulently distributed to the Bradissons."

Salty said nothing for several seconds. His tongue rolled the moist

bit of tobacco from one cheek over to the other. "How did *you* find out all of this?" he asked.

"Lieutenant Tragg arrested Moffgat in Los Angeles, found Mrs. Clarke's diary in his pocket. I instantly decided that this was the real clue Banning Clarke had left in his desk drawer. We managed to locate Rupert Craiglaw, got him on long-distance telephone, learned that he remembered the occasion of having witnessed the will. We also tricked Hayward Small and Bradisson into making recriminations. That cracked the case, and Moffgat finally made a complete confession.

"Bradisson got tired of being blackmailed, and he also wanted Clarke out of the way. He planted arsenic in the saltcellar used by himself and his mother, then got some ipecac. He and his mother took it, pretended to have exactly the symptoms they would have had if they'd taken the arsenic. That was just window-dressing to divert suspicion from themselves over what was due to happen twenty-four hours later, when they opened Pete's bag of arsenic, took out some and waited for an opportunity to plant it where Small would get it. Right after the directors' meeting, they saw their chance. They saw Dorina put a note under the sugar bowl, and knew that Hayward Small usually had a cup of tea in the evening, taking sugar in it. When Jim saw Small looking at the teapot, he introduced the arsenic into the sugar. His mother was standing so as to partially shield what he was doing. But Small, for reasons of his own, didn't take tea that night, and Jim couldn't say anything without giving himself away."

"The dirty rats," Salty said. "If Banning had only told me about that evidence... Oh, well, we can't change things now."

"That's right. It's finished now. There are a few more incidental angles," Mason told him, "but those are the main points."

"Never mind the incidental angles," Salty said. "I reckon you're pretty well fed up with murder stuff, and so am I. Suppose you and Miss Street come over to the camp and we'll fix up a little chow. Lucille's coming up tonight and we're going in to town on a marrying party tomorrow. I thought for a while we'd put it off on account of Banning's death; but I know how Banning would feel about it — he'd want us to go ahead. So we decided we'd make it a foursome."

"A foursome?" Mason asked.

Salty twisted the small piece of tobacco back to the other side of his mouth, nodded. "Dr. Kenward and the nurse decided they were going to Las Vegas and get spliced, and I thought Lucille and I would go along. Well, I'll be getting the food together. We'll have a little banquet tonight. Expect Lucille up almost any time."

Salty turned abruptly away, walked over to the blackened stone fireplace, and got a fire going.

Mason turned to Della Street. "Know something?"

"What?"

"I bet the preacher would make a reduced rate on marrying three couples instead of two."

She looked up at him with wistful tenderness. "Forget it, Chief."

"Why?"

Her eyes looked out over the long reaches of desert that stretched out far below. "We're happy now," she said. "You can't tell what marriage would do to us. We'd have a home. I'd be a housekeeper. You'd need a new secretary... You don't want a home. I don't want you to have a new secretary. Right now you're tired. You've been matching wits with a murderer. You feel as though you'd like to marry and settle down. Day after tomorrow you'll be looking for a new case where you can go like mad, skin through by a thousandth of an inch. That's the way you want to be, and that's the way I want you. You'd never settle down and I don't want you to. And besides, Salty couldn't leave the camp all alone tomorrow."

Mason moved to her side, slipped his arm around her shoulders, held her close to him. "I could argue with you about all that," he said softly.

She laughed up at him. "You could argue all right, but even if you could convince *me*, you couldn't convince *you*. You *know* I'm right."

Mason started to say something, then checked himself, tightened the pressure of his arm. They stood in silence, looking out at the desert where varicolored peaks thrust up into the red sunlight.

"And," Della said, laughing, "we're hardened campaigners who can't waste time with romance when there's work to be done. Salty needs help with that fire, and perhaps he'll let me do some of the cooking."

"Ten to one he won't," Mason said.

"What?"

"Let you help with the cooking."

"No takers. Come on. You don't see Salty wasting time with desert scenery when there's work to be done."

They walked over to where Salty was bending over the fireplace, saw him straighten up, saw him turn toward the boxes of provisions, then pause to stand looking out over the desert.

As they joined him, Salty said almost reverently, "No matter what I'm doing, I always knock off for a few minutes along about this time of day just to look out over the desert — makes you realize man may be pretty active, but he ain't so darn big. You know, folks, the desert is the kindest mother a man ever had, because she's so cruel. Cruelty makes you careful and self-reliant, and that's what the desert wants. She don't want any softies hanging around. Sometimes, when

she's blistering hot and the light burns your eyes out, you see only the cruelty. But then, along about this time of day, she smiles back at you and tells you her cruelty is really kindness, and you can see it from her viewpoint — and it's the right viewpoint."